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## ALL STAR CAST



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# ALL STAR CAST

A NOVEL

BY

NAOMI ROYDE SMITH

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED  
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1936

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FOR  
W. GRAHAM ROBERTSON



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The story of the play included in this novel is my own invention and none of the characters, on or off the stage, is drawn from life.

The translation quoted on page 136 is made from a poem by Arnold Bender.

N. G. R. S.

●

“ O where, my lord ? ”

“ In my mind’s eye, Horatio.”

●

## PROLOGUE

IN the taxi David Winter took out a gold, engine-turned case and offered a cigarette to his companion.

"Thanks! Not!" said O'Hara. "Mine's a cigar. Always 'sociate cigarettes with my Aunt Emily."

"Will there be time?" David wondered as the other produced one of three small havanas from a crumpled paper-bag; pinched it; held it to his ear and then cut off the tip with a knife which he drew up from his hip-pocket where it hung amongst a bunch of keys, from a rather tarnished snake-chain.

"Time?" said O'Hara, accepting David's light.

"For a cigar. It's twenty-past."

"What of it? The curtain won't rise till eighty-four, if then, and the *beau monde* isn't going to leave the lobby till the last photographer packs up. I don't see myself letting any young lovely tread on my feet on her way in to the middle of Row C."

"I'm in Row C too," said David.

"They always give me the end seat. What's your number?"

The young man drew out a thin pocket-book from which, with great precision, he took a green ticket.

"Eighteen," he said, leaning forward to see the figures by the light of the July evening outside the taxi window.

"Other end of the row. Well, I'll see you during the intervals."

"Does one go out?"

"One does. You'll need a couple of drinks between the acts."

David Winter did not propose to have so much as a single drink during the evening, not, at any rate, until his copy had been sent up to the printer. He hoped that it might be possible to get a whisky and soda somewhere in the *Morning Tribune* office while he waited to correct proof of his notice, which would have to go to press before midnight for the London edition: but, till he had written this, his first piece of official dramatic criticism, he would, he felt sure, need no stimulant but that of his own rather nervous, though not unpleasant, excitement at the prospect of the work he had undertaken to accomplish.

"Bit of luck for you, Arbuthnot going off to

Malvern in the week of a Renishaw first-night," said O'Hara, whose cigar was burning richly. "Always send me own second string down to these highbrow provincial affairs. I've no use for drama made in Birmingham."

David Winter looked quickly at his companion.

"Arbuthnot does not agree with you," he said in his low, mild voice. "He says everything good in English drama for the past thirty years has come from the Repertory Theatres—Birmingham—Manchester—Dublin . . ."

O'Hara grunted.

"Arbuthnot directed a Repertory Theatre," he said, "before he took to criticising plays made in London or imported from the Continent. I'm an Irishman meself—at least my father was—my mother, thank God, was a Russian. I was born in Monte Carlo. I've no use for insularity, or the Oxford accent."

Winter was a Trinity man and had played for the A.D.C. and for the Marlowe Society. He suspected O'Hara of referring to these activities under the general heading of "Oxford accent": but the President of the Critics' Circle was not a person to be put right in matters of detail by a young tyro, especially by one to whom he had just stood dinner and to whom he had already

given a great many pointers; rather too many, indeed. David, though inexperienced, was not without the equipment for making up his own mind on the merits of a performance and had, once or twice already, decided that, though he had to listen, he need not always accept the direction O'Hara gave him. Facts were all very well; valuable too, as supplementing his amateur's knowledge of the London Theatre; but opinions, even O'Hara's, were no good at second hand. O'Hara made it a point of honour to direct those critical decisions which, in the theatre, must be made without that interval for reflection possible to those who pass judgment in any other domain of art. As he had a shrewd eye for a box-office success and a memory stocked with the plots and casts of every play produced on the London stage for the past forty-five years (he had been taken to see the Bancrofts and Mrs. Kendal in *Diplomacy* at the age of seven), most of the younger critics were only too ready to base their own notices of a new play on the words O'Hara uttered in the bar behind the dress circle during the intervals on a first-night.

Arbuthnot had warned his young colleague of this practice.

"I never go out during an interval myself," he said, "but you'll find them quite a friendly lot if

you care to join them: all the same, I'd rather the *Tribune's* notice were not just an echo of O'Hara. He's quite equal to contradicting everything he'll say in to-morrow's *News* when he comes to write his survey of the week in next Saturday's *Register*. Don't try to write what you think I'd have written either. Make up your own mind and remember that a play is not a novel. You've got to set out a clear statement of the plot and then fill in your space with comments on the acting. As it's your first attempt, don't waste your words slaughtering a small-part actor—that's a sign of inexperience. Praise what you can and let your blame be silent. Renishaw hasn't written a play for five years, as, of course, you know. There's a good deal of expectation about this one. It is bound to be interesting. I'm told it's a new departure. And don't forget to mention Beany the producer."

Winter had taken this advice to heart and, not wishing to disturb his rather dedicated mood, had dined at a small restaurant near his flat instead of going to the club where he would have been certain of meeting and having to talk with other men. To his surprise, when he entered the restaurant a few minutes after seven o'clock, he found O'Hara already seated there. Before he had time to wonder whether the great man would remember

meeting him at a party, three weeks earlier, he had been recognised and most cordially invited to share his table.

No one could be more entertaining than O'Hara when he was in the mood to amuse a companion, and David had been very well entertained as well as enlightened in the choice of the kind of dinner a critic should choose before a first-night.

O'Hara had not made the mistake of offering his guest any advice at the outset, but had chatted very pleasantly, telling one or two stories of his adventures in New York, from whence he had returned a month earlier, and congratulating David on a series of articles on the German Theatre which the young man had contributed to one of the weekly papers that summer.

It was only when they were in their taxi on the way to the Empress Theatre that he began to show signs of dictatorship, announcing that the real interest of the evening was, not that Renishaw had broken his five years' silence, but that an actor, whose name Winter had never heard, was about to appear in it.

"Keep your eye on Madison," he said. "He's not been seen lately: been on a world tour with Estelle Vyce and then got pneumonia playing the lead in that monstrous film they tried to make of one

of Jules Verne's tales. They worked for ten weeks at it, night and day, somewhere on the Norwegian coast, and then knocked it out because they'd come to the end of their backing before the thing was half done. They've billed Lewis Keane and that clothes-peg of a woman, Vera Paley, above him to-night: but I hear he's frozen the marrow in the company's bones at rehearsal."

"What's the play about?" David had asked, wishing to avoid an undertaking to report with enthusiasm on this unknown actor's performance before he had seen it.

"That's what we are going to find out, my lad. Beany has rehearsed behind closed doors with the curtain down for fear of any details getting about. Renishaw told me last week that it was a gesture towards himself. He's been rehearsing it for the last fortnight with Beany. Always does. Queer chap, Renishaw! Made pots of money out of his plays and still lives in two rooms at the top of an old house in Russell Square where he used to starve while the managers turned down his work. 'S my belief this is the first play he ever wrote and he's flinging it in the public's face to see if they'll swallow it now on his reputation."

It was clear that O'Hara's flood of conjecture and gossip was intended to cover his inability to

answer David's question. How odd, David reflected, that any man should value a reputation for omniscience to the point of not being able to admit a perfectly excusable ignorance; destructive too of the impression it sought to maintain! If O'Hara could have brought himself to reply "I don't know" to this one point, all the rest of his information would have been reinforced. As it was, the evasion seemed to cast a film of spuriousness over all he had said till then.

They reached the theatre as the clocks in the Strand were chiming the half-hour. It took Winter a good five minutes to make his way through the scented, chattering throng of first-nighters in the lobby and to put his light overcoat and hat in the cloakroom which opened like the small, lit stage of a marionette show, half-way down the broad and curving stairway that led to the auditorium.

The orchestra was playing as he took his seat; but there was only a scattering of people in the stalls and dress circle, among them several dramatic critics in black ties and, her golden head bent over her programme, the beautiful young wife of Godfrey Bates, the New York Press correspondent, who always attended first-nights with her husband. David pulled down his waistcoat; pulled up the knees of his trousers; shook his shoulders, and was

preparing to slit through the red paper seal on his programme, when a burst of applause from the pit and upper galleries made him look round to see whose entrance was rousing the faithful. It was Sandra Vivaldi, the Anglo-Italian actress who, since her marriage to Sir George Archer twenty years ago, had never quite retired from the stage. She stood at the front of a box on the prompt side, and faced the audience with downcast eyes. A faint smile lifted the corners of her mouth. As the applause grew louder she raised one hand in a deprecatory gesture and withdrew into the shadows of the box while her companions seated themselves in full view of the house.

"Come to see her daughter's début," said a little dark man with an almost concave face who occupied the stall on David's left. "They say the girl's going to be better than her mother."

"I didn't know," said David, opening his programme.

The little man seemed offended.

"I had a long article on her in the *Comet* last night," he said.

"Stupid of me to miss it." David glanced down the cast. "I don't see any Vivaldi here."

"She calls herself Archer, Mary Archer. She's there all right," said the little man and turned to

talk to a grey-haired critic with the profile of Antinous grown old, who, encumbered with a stick, was making his lame and difficult way into the third seat from the gangway.

"Too bad!" he grunted. "They ought to give me the end seat."

"Like to change with me?" David suggested.

"And sit out of sight of the O.P. entrance—no, thanks!" snapped the old man. "The end seat in the *centre* gangway is what I expect. They've got a new man in the box-office here. That's a pity."

The little man sniggered.

"Someone's going to suffer for this," he said, "author or actor or producer. What? Never down on the ladies, are you, Dacres?"

"I don't like that fellow Madison," said the old man viciously. "He drops his voice. Throwing it away they call it. Giving light and shade to a part. Sheer laziness. That's what it is."

The audience was now beginning to throng into the stalls. The boxes were already filled. The murmurs of the pit and gallery rose and fell and were broken by applause as film and stage stars made their entrances in the semi-private rôles of public characters actively engaged in resting from their labours.

David was familiar enough with London first-

nights to realise that this was a more excited, more tensely expected occasion than usual. The house was packed to the last inch of standing room and its enthusiasm was so high already that it seemed as though, when the curtain rose, the interest and excitement must fall, since it could hardly be raised much higher. He looked sideways at the two critics on his left. The pale crushed face of the little man from the *Comet*; the beautiful regular features of old Dacres as he leant forward, his chin on the hands he had folded over the knob of his walking-stick, expressed nothing but a rather contemptuous boredom. David wondered if it were because he was for the first time taking a responsibility on his own shoulders, being a professional critic instead of a spectator for his own amusement, that this sense of heightened expectation had seized him and made him tense with a feeling akin to that stage-fright which was, he knew, sickening the hearts of the players now waiting on the other side of the curtain.

The orchestra started, for the third time, on the *Valse Triste*: the stalls were almost full: the gangways were blocked with women in glittering cloaks and foamy dresses, who laughed and chattered with one another and with their escorts and behaved as though they were arriving at a

party and had no idea that a play was about to be given. In another minute the house lights would begin to dim.

There was a commotion in the row in front of him. A tall, blond Englishman, with a red clean-shaven face and an expression of slightly bovine amiability, was claiming a seat already occupied by someone else. David recognised Betterton, the critic of the *Sunday Post*, who, as he had not to get his copy in on the first night of any play, usually arrived, as he was now doing, in a white tie and tails, late from a dinner-party — or ready to go on to dance and sup elsewhere. Betterton played golf. It was said that he owed his present lucrative and leisured job to the happy but not surprising coincidence that the owner of the *Sunday Post* was also a golfer.

When the disturbance had died down, David opened his programme again, and, turning over the pages occupied with photographs of the greater stars of the evening, interspersed with advertisements of cigarettes and whiskies and women's underclothing, came to the play-bill itself:

●

## THE ACE OF WANDS

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

BY

WILLIAM RENISHAW

It was a queer title. Possibly that was why it had not been announced until the actual advertisement of the new play by William Renishaw had appeared in the daily papers on Monday. David turned a page and looked at the synopsis of scenery. The arrangement of the scenes was ordinary enough. Another of those country-house plays with a set in which french windows opened into a garden and a staircase gave the leading lady effective entrances and exits. It was a little unusual in this type of play to start off with a bedroom scene. David was young enough to hope that it would not be one of the conventionally improper kind that had long ceased either to amuse or shock him on the stage.

*Act I*

SCENE 1. *A bedroom in the Rawlinsons' house in Surrey at 6.45 on an evening in early September. (The curtain will be lowered in this scene to denote the lapse of a quarter of an hour.)*

SCENE 2. *The Library of the Rawlinsons' house. (This scene runs contemporaneously with the second part of Scene 1.)*

*Act II*

SCENE 1. *The Library. 9.30 p.m. The same day.*

SCENE 2. *The Same. Midnight.*

*Act III*

*Conrad Nuneham's flat in Mount Street. Six weeks later.*

TIME: The present day.

He turned back to the list of characters: it was long and consisted entirely of well-known names, except for that of Mary Archer, and even she was not, he knew, without an introduction to the stage.

"In the order of their appearance," he read:

ALICE	.	.	.	<i>Winifred Marsden</i>
FRANCIS	.	.	.	<i>Nicholas Madison</i>
MRS. RAWLINSON	.	.	.	<i>Nora Bowdler</i>
MARTA NUNEHAM	.	.	.	<i>Vera Paley</i>
CONRAD NUNEHAM	.	.	.	<i>Lewis Keane</i>
VERITY PEARCE	.	.	.	<i>Mary Archer</i>
LISA THELUSSON	.	.	.	<i>Geraldine Hunt</i>
CYRIL GRAINGER	.	.	.	<i>Billy Vyse</i>

MAJOR RAWLINSON	.	<i>James Dawlish</i>
ARCHDEACON BARTLETT		<i>Septimus Ward</i>
MRS. BARTLETT	.	<i>Anna Brett</i>
INSPECTOR DOBSON	.	<i>John Wylie</i>
SERGEANT WALES	.	<i>Tom Bays</i>
MRS. EMMER	.	<i>Nellie Ragg</i>

"Lordy! What a cast!" said the little man at his elbow.



## THE FIRST ACT

THE curtain rose on a set which justified Winter's forecast. The brightly furnished bedroom had three doors: one of these faced the audience next to a window that opened on to a balcony beyond which the tops of trees rose into an evening sky. Twin beds stood against the wall on the prompt side: a flowered chintz covered the ottoman placed at their feet. The same chintz flounced a dressing-table on the wall opposite the beds and was repeated in window curtains and chair covers. A small table stood down by the footlights a few yards away from a door on the spectator's right. There was a third door on the O.P. side below the dressing-table. The door by the window was open and showed a rail holding towels below a glass shelf, indicating a bathroom. But, before he had time to notice these details of civilised comfort in the conditions under which the drama was about to be unfolded, David was aware of a sinister and depressing effect from what should have been a cheerful setting. As the pretty young actress who, dressed as a housemaid, was un-

packing two large suitcases and spreading their contents on the chairs and the ottoman, moved about the stage, he had time to account to himself for this unexpected impression. It arose from the colouring of the scene. The chintz covers were darker than they should have been — dark and rather alarming; a design of orange tiger-lilies and purple grapes flamed and clustered on their glazed surfaces. The sky outside the window was lit in a way that indicated thunder in the air. On the dressing-table two massive brass candlesticks of rich workmanship, representing coiled snakes, held tall crimson candles on either side of the mirror, repeating the colour of the carpet. On the wall between the dressing-table and the bathroom door, a collection of spears and small curved shields, evidently brought from the South Seas, added its note of unrest. Beany, the producer, who was sometimes reproached for making his sets too luxurious for their inhabitants, had certainly given his country-house bedroom handsome accessories; but either he was following the author's instruction or else he had deliberately chosen this ominous colouring.

It was possible that David's own dislike of these particular colours was affecting him in this disagreeable way. He was perhaps too conscious

of his new function: too keenly aware of intended significances in what, after all, might turn out to have little more than entertainment value.

While he was debating with himself, there was a sudden burst of applause, hushed quickly into silence as the actor whose entrance had provoked it advanced towards the table by the footlights and placed an attaché case on it. He had come in by the door on the prompt side, of which David had only a partial view from his seat at the end of the row. This must be that Nicholas Madison of whom O'Hara had warned him; against whom old Dacres had expressed his prejudice; Nicholas Madison whose name, alongside that of Lewis Keane, David had noticed in electric lights outside the theatre.

It was natural that the audience recognising him should convey their welcome to a famous actor on his return to the London stage, but unusual that their applause should die down almost as soon as it had arisen, and that the actor himself should appear to be so completely unaware of it. No sooner had David formulated his wonder than it resolved itself into comprehension. The thin, slightly stooping figure, dressed in a badly fitting livery of maroon cloth piped with scarlet — again that disturbing conjunction of colour! —

moved with a hesitating step and brought with it so keen a sense of distress and bewilderment that the audience was carried past its personal recognition of the player into the emotion of the part he had already made real and compelling without one spoken word.

The actor had made his entrance; the play had begun. Nicholas Madison had ceased to exist for himself, or for anyone else in the house; he was submerged and expressive in the guise of the footman of whom he was already giving account.

For a moment he stood there, his lips working, his eyes restless and unhappy, clasping and unclasping his poor hands, over which the sleeves of his coat fell almost to the knuckles. Then the trim housemaid, on her knees before a suitcase, looked up over the froth of tissue paper and sliding silken garment in her arms.

"Well!" she said sharply, "what is it now, Francis?"

"The key," he said, "I can't find it."

The words, half whispered, fell into the hush of attention that now held the audience. One or two late-comers, pushing their way to those centre seats no management seems able to deny to the unpunctual, were greeted with a low hiss of "Sit down!" It seemed to prolong the sound of the

indrawn breath on which the actor had finished his line.

David noticed the self-possession of Winifred Marsden as the housemaid as she rustled the tissue paper in her hands and shook out a filmy garment from the suitcase on the floor, playing for time before giving the next cue. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she said:

"Didn't you get the keys from Mr. Nuneham?"

"Yes," said Francis, "but they don't any of them fit one of the cases."

The girl rose to her feet.

"I'll see to it in a minute," she said briskly, "but I must get my own job done first." She carried some of the clothes and placed them in various drawers while the man stood, vague and bewildered, in the centre of the stage.

"You oughtn't to be in here," she said, as the footman made no movement to go. "Have you put out young Mr. Grainger's things?"

"Yes, I—I—think so," stammered the footman.

Alice shut the door of a wardrobe with decision.

"You're a funny sort of footman, you are," she commented. "Where was your last place, anyhow?"

"In the West Country."

"Well, it must have been a queer situation."

A faint smile came and went across the actor's face.

"Queer enough," he said.

"Put that paper back in the case and carry it out to the box-room, since you've nothing else to do."

The man obeyed her with slow, unpractised hands.

"Has Mr. Bond spoken to you about not waiting at dinner to-night?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "He says that I'm to go round and see that all the windows are closed, as soon as they've gone into the dining-room. To go round with you, Alice."

"I don't like it, Francis, and that's the truth. Mr. Bond was saying it's because you made such a proper mess of waiting last night when there was only the master and mistress and that Miss Thelsson. But if you ask me there's more to it than that—though the parlourmaid's glad enough to take on with Mr. Bond, single-handed. But I've read me evening papers same as anyone else."

The rustle of the tissue paper in the footman's hands was like the shiver of fear as he placed it in the case while the girl was speaking. When he bent to close the case the snap of the clasps as he pressed them down made him start.

"What of it?" he said, without looking round.

"What of it? You do live in a dream. Sittin' in corners reading your book instead of joining in the talk. What was the rest of the staff like in that place down West?"

"All silent and all damned."

"Hey?"

"It's a quotation."

"Oh, is it? Well, I'll thank you not to talk tear-off calendars to me, see!"

"I'm sorry, Alice."

"Look here, Francis. You've got a lot to learn and I'm one of those to have to teach you. Mr. Bond says to me — 'See that new footman through the upstairs work, Alice, and I'll learn him to wait next week when the family's gone to town.' *You'll* have to wait on us then. It'll be a caution."

The man gave a wintry smile.

"I shall get used to it," he said, and then, with an effort, "what was it you said about the evening papers?"

"It's all full of this jewel robbery at Newbery Park. Pearls and diamonds. You know! And no sign of the thief. Same as there wasn't three weeks ago at Sir Arthur Noel's place. Didn't you hear of that neither?"

"No."

"Well — you *are*! I'll get Mrs. Cooley to lend you her *Evening Post* after supper. She's always through with it by the time the drawing-room coffee's been served."

"Thank you, Alice."

"Listen. There's the mistress coming upstairs with Mrs. Nuneham. You'll have to clear out. Take these cases to the box-room and, as soon as they begin going down to the drawing-room before dinner, we'll go round together and get the bedroom windows shut. The master'll be out of his dressing-room before half-past. Have you put out Mr. Nuneham's things all right?"

He shook his head.

"Well, you are! Hurry up and get it done."

The man turned to go. At the door into the dressing-room he stopped.

"The little suitcase," he said.

"You'll have to leave it. I dare say Mr. Nuneham will unlock it for you when he comes up."

Voices could be heard outside the O.P. door, which now opened to admit Vera Paley, the star actress famous for wearing to-day what every fashionable woman would be trying to wear next week. She was a small, beautifully made woman,

young, but no longer very slim, who, in defiance of the *coiffeurs* of London, Paris and New York, had always worn her corn-gold hair in a thick, wreath-like braid around her lovely head. Critics had been known to complain that, whether she played Rosalind or the Second Mrs. Tanqueray, she was never anyone but Vera Paley; but the salvo of applause with which she was greeted from the stalls as well as from the more discriminating parts of the house showed that she held a wide public under some kind of spell. She paused, holding the door open with her left hand, outstretched at full arm's length behind her, so that the player with whom she was talking as she entered was hidden from the audience.

Without bowing or losing her pose, she smiled as the applause increased in volume. She let the play cease while she, as Vera Paley, took her reception. The women behind David gasped audible approval of her dress, a pale-grey suit with a huge collar and cuffs of summer fur framing her face and hands. A small hat of folded silvered straw with a flame-coloured quill stuck through it just a shade darker than the paint on her lips and finger-nails, gave point to the amber lights in her wide brown eyes. In one hand she carried a crocodile-skin jewel-case.

"Vera always wears a touch of flame," chirped one of the voices behind David.

"Remember her evening dress in the second act of *Sheer Vanity*?" said the other.

The applause went on for ten or twelve more seconds, and then, with a visible gesture, Vera Paley took up her part and became Marta Nuneham. The pleased smile froze on her lips. The wide brows contracted in a frown. She cast an appraising glance round the stage; let her eyes rest for a disapproving second on the figure of Alice the housemaid, who was standing in professional aloofness waiting until she could make her escape through the doorway now blocked by the new arrivals, and, speaking over her shoulder to the still invisible person behind her, said:

"Is *this* the room?"

"Yes," said a pleasant voice.

Marta came down to the footlights, pulling her long grey suede gloves through her hands in a gesture of impatience. The applause broke out again and died quickly as Nora Bowdler, who was far too experienced an actress to allow her own entrance to appear to dim that of a reigning star, took up the part of Mrs. Rawlinson.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here," she said

in the pleasant voice of a middle-aged hospitable gentlewoman. "The room has just been done up and I'm not sure that I like the chintz now it is cut. You know how different they look in the piece."

Marta Nuneham took no notice of this apologetic remark. She went to the dressing-table, placed her jewel-case on it and then turned and faced the room.

"Why are there two beds here?" she asked, and the trilling of the r's showed that it was not an Englishwoman who spoke.

Some of the audience were inclined to snigger at the question, but the actress was prepared for this and checked it by the intonation of her next question.

"Why is Conrad's luggage in my room?"

Mrs. Rawlinson turned to the housemaid.

"Alice," she said, "that case does not belong to Mrs. Nuneham. Take it to Francis to unpack."

"Beg pardon, madam, but Francis has not been able to find the key. He brought it in here to me just now. I think he's gone to look for Mr. Nuneham."

"Go and make sure," said the mistress of the house.

When the maid had gone out, Mrs. Rawlinson turned to the guest. "My dear," she said, "I'm so

sorry. I didn't know that you and Conrad did not share a room. The second bed was in the dressing-room but I thought . . ."

The other gave her shoulder an angry shrug.

"I can have the bed put back in the dressing-room for Conrad," Mrs. Rawlinson went on. "We had it taken out this morning to make space for a large writing-table, as he is going to work there."

"Is there another door to this dressing-room so that he can come there without disturbing me?"

"I'm afraid only one that gives on to the service staircase."

"Then his secretary — she too will have to come through my room? It is too much. And is Conrad to use my bath?"

"He could go across the landing to ours — but——"

"This is a very strange arrangement."

"This is an old-fashioned house. You must make allowances. I can't very well give you each a single room, as we've got Miss Thelusson in one and Cyril Grainger in the other this week-end, — I've had to put Verity in the old nursery."

"Verity?"

"Verity Pearce."

"Oh. Conrad's Miss Pearce. I had forgotten. She is known to you by her first name?"

"Verity is my husband's god-daughter."

"So! You do not look as if there was dark blood in your family."

"Her mother was a Brazilian — a very beautiful and charming creature who died when Verity was at school. We have not seen much of the girl for some years. That is one reason why we are so glad of the chance that has brought her here with you."

"We have come here for the sake of Conrad's book: because your husband too, he is interested in these old weapons Conrad writes about — not because Miss Pearce is related to you."

Mrs. Rawlinson's determination not to lose her temper with this ill-mannered woman had by this time acquired an edge.

"I will see what can be done about the rooms to-morrow," she said, "if you will put up with things as they are to-night. Mr. Grainger is going back to town on Sunday evening. I'm sure you will understand. I have people coming to dinner — Archdeacon Bartlett is most anxious to meet your husband. We have a new, and I fear very inexperienced footman—so if you and Conrad——"

"Everything is Conrad — Conrad — I will not have him to sleep in this room."

"I have told you that can be arranged."

"And meanwhile my room is a public corridor — three doors — and a window that opens to the ground for the gardener to come through."

"This is not on the ground floor, Mrs. Nuneham."

The beautiful insolent creature crossed the stage to the open window.

"Almost — and there are steps," she flung back at her hostess.

"I assure you no one will try to come in through the window — or through the bathroom. The door on to the landing is bolted on the inside."

"There is a bolt on this door also?" She pointed to the dressing-room.

"I am afraid not. Until this evening no one has thought it necessary."

Marta Nuneham was about to make a comment on this information when the door to the landing opened and Verity Pearce came in. She was a tall, slight girl with dark hair in curls brushed back from a high forehead and tied in a bunch on her neck, showing a long throat from which her face rose pale and flower-like with a large, full-lipped mouth and two eyes set so wide apart that they belied the alertness of her figure and movement by the brooding, almost somnambulistic expression they gave to her countenance. The clapping of

gloved hands from one side of the stalls showed where friends of the young actress were placed. The signal was taken up politely by the rest of the house. In the box on David's right the mother of Mary Archer sat motionless, her eyes fixed on her child.

David, although his interest had not been too closely held by the rather unnatural scene between hostess and guest, felt a certain impatience at the interruption: this was shared by the little man at his side.

"Silly habit," he said in an undertone. "Vera's holding it for the girl – and she'll have to do it again when Keane come on."

David made no attempt to reply: he was watching Mary Archer, who, clearly almost paralysed with stage-fright, stood waiting for her cue, unable to cast so much as one look into that abyss beyond the footlights from which the kind but terrifying interruption came.

"Poor kid!" thought David, pitying Mary Archer, "she's nervous. I wish they'd let her get on with her part."

Then he saw that it was not Mary Archer whose plight had aroused his compassion but Verity Pearce, whom she had already created as she stood there, nervous, unhappy and yet not undignified

in her part. Here was the same quality that he had recognised a few minutes earlier, when Nicholas Madison had brought another kind of hesitation and fear on to the stage. There was a difference in degree, naturally, and the girl, who lacked the other player's experience, was not able, while ignoring the interruption, to cut it short by that immediate imposition of her own character on the consciousness of the audience which is the last and rarest of histrionic gifts.

"What are you doing here?" Marta Nuneham's question cut across the sound of clapping.

"I think Conrad wants me," said the girl in a voice cool and clear and fresh with youth. Verity Pearce might be suffering from a momentary nervousness but she was not either weak or irresolute.

David leant back in his stall. The play had come alive again.

"Not in my bedroom!" snapped Marta.

"Major Rawlinson told me I should find him — that his room, where he will be working, was through this door." The girl was not to be routed by a rudeness to which, it was clear, she was accustomed.

"The way into the room you are looking for is up the service staircase. You can go that way."

"No," said Mrs. Rawlinson sharply, "Verity cannot use the servants' staircase."

"Why not? She is Conrad's servant."

"My servants would not like it."

"So, to spare your servants my bedroom is to be a public highway."

"I have already promised you that I will make a more convenient arrangement to-morrow. For the present I think Verity had better go to her own room and dress for dinner." Mrs. Rawlinson turned to Verity. "I will explain to Conrad, my dear, when he comes in from the garden."

"Verity cannot go to her room yet," interposed Marta. "She knows that I have had to come down without my maid. The horror left me without notice yesterday. Miss Pearce has to help me dress."

"Alice the housemaid will maid you. She has already unpacked."

"Not my jewels. I have the case with me."

"That," said Mrs. Rawlinson, with an indignant glance at the case which Marta had laid on the dressing-table, "you can quite easily unpack yourself."

"This is intolerable!" stormed Marta. "You put

me in the worst room in the house. You show me that it is only Conrad who is welcome here. You forbid his employee to work for me without my permission. I will not stay here to be insulted. I will go back to London to-night — at once! Where is the telephone?"

"I'm afraid the last train to town left the junction at 6.45," said Mrs. Rawlinson, not without regret.

"Where is the telephone?"

"I saw one in the library," said Verity. "If you will give me a message . . ."

"For you to know what I plan to do — no. I will telephone myself. Is there no telephone in this room?"

"No," said Mrs. Rawlinson. "There is one in my own room — just across the landing — if you are quite sure you must go."

"So! I will go there. To your room which has the comforts I may not have here."

"Very well."

Mrs. Rawlinson went with Marta to the door. "It is on the table by the bedside," she said, not following her guest out of the room. Then she turned to Verity.

"My dear," she said, "this is awful. Is the woman mad?"

The girl shook her head.

"Only wicked," she said. "She was annoyed at something Conrad said downstairs. Presently she will — she *may*, be all right again."

"But — how do you stand it?"

"I say to myself — she is a Russian. She has been through very great tragedies."

Mrs. Rawlinson smiled.

"My child," she said, "it would be funny, if it were not so dreadful for you — to hear you making excuses for a woman with a temper like hers. Do you remember the rages you used to fly into when you were a little girl?"

"Yes," said Verity. "I still have them sometimes, but I can generally manage to keep them to myself now."

"I suppose, knowing how it feels, you can make allowances for her."

"Sometimes." Verity sighed. "But one day I shall not be able to."

"And Conrad?"

"Oh, Aunt Madge . . .!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Rawlinson. "I was afraid it might be like that. You cannot stay with him."

"I must — till the book is finished."

"And then——?"

"I never think further than to-morrow."

"Do you suppose she really means to go to London to-night?"

"No. I think she will change her mind."

"Well. Let me know if she does. And come down as soon as you can. You'll find me in the library before dinner."

Before Mrs. Rawlinson could leave the room Marta was back again in a more chastened mood.

"Your telephone operator says it will take twenty minutes to get through to London," she announced, "so I have cancelled the call and you will forgive me for my temper and let me stay."

"But of course," said Mrs. Rawlinson. "I hoped all the time you would. We dine at a quarter to eight." With a passing smile at Verity she went.

"If you will give me your key," said Verity, "I will take out what you want to wear to-night."

Marta pulled off her hat and slipped her coat from her shoulders, letting it slide to the floor.

"Hang that up for me," she said. "I think I will wear my silver dress—and the pink pearl earrings and rope that belonged to the Archduchess."

As Verity stooped and picked up the coat, Marta stood in the centre of the stage and pulled up from under her dress a small key on a gold chain that hung round her neck.

"Here you are," she said, holding out the chain

so that the key swung, as on a pendulum, from the tips of her fingers. Before Verity could take it from her she dropped it to the floor. Verity stooped to pick it up and her eyes were black with rage.

"Shall I lay out your dress?" she asked.

"No. I may change my mind. Come back at a quarter to eight when I have had my bath."

"But dinner is at a quarter to eight."

"I know. We shall not be down then."

The girl bit her lip and, crossing to the dressing-table, unfastened the jewel-case and took out a rope of pink pearls and a small white velvet case. She put the case on a tray in front of the mirror. Before she could lay the pearls beside it Francis appeared at the door of the dressing-room. Verity turned to face him, the pearls hanging down from her hand. In half a second's pause Francis had seen them and, for the moment, lost the thread of the reason which had brought him into the room.

"Well!" said Marta, and though her tone was sharp it lacked the edge it had when she spoke to Verity. The suggestion of an instinctive vulgarity which discriminated between every woman and any man was conveyed in the single word and the look that accompanied it. David, appreciating the manner, felt his estimation of Vera Paley as an actress rise. He had not time to ask himself whether

the entrance of Madison had once more heightened the illusion of the stage before the man spoke.

"The case," he said, "I forgot it. It is not unpacked yet."

"There is no need for you to unpack it," said Verity, "I will do that."

Marta turned to the girl. "You? You? Why should you valet Conrad?"

Verity came down-stage, ignoring the question.

"That's Mr. Nuneham's dispatch-case," she said to the footman. "It contains his manuscript and notes. If you will take it into his room I will attend to it myself."

The man laid his hand on the case to lift it from the table.

"Put it down. Since you have had the impertinence to bring it in here, here it shall stay," said Marta.

"But . . ." began Verity.

"Oh, no," Marta interrupted her. "That room is Conrad's *bedroom*. Do you understand? I'm not going to let it be said that you use it with my connivance."

"Please, Mrs. Nuneham . . ." Verity made a gesture towards the footman as if begging Marta to restrain herself, at least until he had gone.

"Please — what?"

The man still stood, his hand on the suitcase, his eyes cast down, listening almost in a trance, waiting. When Verity spoke again, an infinitesimal relaxation of his muscles showed that it was for the friendliness of her voice he waited.

"If you would prefer it," said the girl, "I can open the case here and then the footman can carry it into Mr. Nuneham's room."

"So that you can have an excuse to follow him there."

The girl let her arms drop to her side, but her fists were clenched and they did not relax as she stood quivering with resentment.

"There is no reason," Marta went on, "why I should not see what is in this case. Or perhaps there is."

With tight lips, pale, angry, but controlled, Verity came down-stage to the table.

"Please." She spoke to the footman whose hands were still on the case.

"I have not got the keys here," he said.

"There is no key. The lock twists."

"I shall tell Conrad that you give away confidential secrets to a servant," Marta taunted her.

Verity twisted the locks and they sprang open with a snap.

"There!" she said. "You may look for yourself."

Marta came down to the table and lifted a sheaf of papers out of the box.

"You said 'nothing but manuscript notes'. There is something else."

She drew an object about twelve inches long in a wash-leather covering from under the papers. "I knew you were not speaking the truth."

"That is the copper dagger Sir James Purton brought back from Egypt. Mr. Nuneham thinks it is the longest yet found — he wants to compare it with those in Major Rawlinson's collection." The girl spoke slowly, trying to re-establish her self-control, trying to make her voice patient.

This time the applause which heralded the entrance of Lewis Keane annoyed David, breaking as it did into his own charmed listening to the cadences of Mary Archer's voice as she spoke the commonplace, expository sentences whose significance lay in pushing on the first stages of the situation not yet developed. The next minute he had forgotten it while the extraordinary charm which was the actor's greatest asset showed itself, in his flowing, languid gait as he walked down to the table.

"Hallo, Marta," he said, "take care of that dagger. One edge of it is toothed."

"It is so old — it cannot cut any longer."

"It might scratch or stab. What is it doing here anyway?"

"Ask the footman. He brought it in."

"Conrad," said Verity. "It's my fault. I should have taken charge of your case myself when we got out of the car. But I forgot and let it go up with your suitcase."

"Give me that relic, Marta." He took the dagger from his wife and putting it back into the suitcase with the paper, snapped the fasteners.

"Take it to my dressing-room," he said to the footman.

"How dare you disobey me?" said Marta, as the man once more laid his hands on the case. "I told you it is not to go in there."

Conrad nodded to the footman.

"That's all right," he said kindly. "You may go."

"Thank you, sir," said the man. He turned away. The three standing round the table were too intent on themselves and on one another to notice that, as he went, the footman paused for a moment and half turned to look at the window, beyond which the sky had by this time darkened

and faded from sunset to a cloudy twilight.

When the door had closed behind Francis, Keane began to speak. His singularly beautiful voice, veiled and sometimes husky with an emotion which had an almost feminine quality, had in conjunction with his tall, well-proportioned figure and finely modelled head, done at least as much to establish him in the forefront of his profession at an early age as his admitted accomplishment in the performance of straight parts in modern drama. David had seen him three times during the run of *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, each time with an increased perception of his strong yet delicate art. Memories of that fine performance rose to give point to his admiration of the changes, slight but significant, in make-up and in the rhythm of speech and movement which had, in the few short lines he had spoken, already differentiated to-night's Conrad Nuneham from the half-crazed Archduke Gregory in the earlier play.

"Marta! Marta!" he said with a smile, half suffering, half tender. "Must to-day be one of your bad days? The Rawlinsons are so distressed that you do not seem comfortable here — and — well — really — why mayn't I have my precious script in my own room since you don't feel you want *me* in yours?"

"Your script? I thought it was Miss Pearce's."

"Verity is the only person who can make head or tail of it just now. It is all so cut up and annotated."

"And 'Verity' is so lazy she cannot make you a copy."

Conrad's smile faded.

"That is not fair, Marta."

"Not fair! Not fair! To whom are you always fair? Not to me. I must drag myself—be dragged after you like a box of luggage where you want to go. I must sleep in this room where there is no telephone and where everyone comes—even the manservant. And the only thing you care for is the box of papers and Verity—Verity!"

"Marta," said the girl, "may I go?"

"No. I will say what I want to both of you. I will not have you work in there—both together all the evening, all the morning."

"Not to-night, Marta, and to-morrow——"

"To-morrow we shall see. But to-night—this box—these papers that no one but Verity can understand—they stay here—here in my room. On that table. And now I will have a bath. Go in there, Miss Pearce, and see if the water is hot for me."

Verity went up-stage and out by the bathroom

door and Marta, walking to and fro in the room, began to take off her dress, talking rapidly as she did so.

"It is too much. There is no thought for me. I am all cold and tired with the journey — there is no fire in this room."

"It is mid-September. No one needs a fire on a day like this."

"No one! I do, but I may not have it in your stupid English house."

"Marta. Do you want me to ring and ask for a fire to be lit for you?"

"I will not have another strange servant in this room."

She kicked off her shoes; slipped her feet into mules and thrust her arms into the sleeves of a dressing-gown.

"That man." She was near the door of the dressing-room now. "He smiles to himself — he is a criminal. You are all criminals. I hate you — I hate you — I wish you were dead."

Half sobbing in hysterical rage, with her flimsy dressing-gown whirling round her like a cloud, Marta rushed out through the bathroom door, slamming it behind her. A confused sound of voices came through but no words were audible.

Conrad, left alone, sat down, stunned and ex-

hausted by the scene, in a chair facing the door through which Marta had made her stormy exit. After a moment it opened and Verity came out.

"Conrad," she said, coming down-stage and facing him where he sat. "It's no use. I'd better go."

He shook his head.

"Don't say that, Verity — not now."

"You can easily get another secretary. A man, perhaps."

Conrad stood up.

"Look here!" he said on a hard light tone. "We've got to pull ourselves together and go down to dinner. Marta'll behave all right when she's had some food. And in any case" — his voice faltered and grew husky — "Verity, I couldn't stick it if you didn't stick it with me."

The girl looked up at him.

"I know," she said.

The clear beauty of her voice and of the grave face she lifted to his sent a sting of tears to David's eyes. While his sight was still dazzled, the tab curtains fell together as the girl and the man stood at arm's length from one another; not touching one another; holding one another in an almost frightened gaze.

In the twilight of the darkened house, lit

strangely by the reflection of the footlights beating on the gold fringe of the tabs, the applause was hushed and perfunctory. The women behind David whispered their admiration of Vera Paley's clothes. The man at his side said: "Well, the dagger's been planted. I suppose Vera will attack someone with it."

The tabs were drawn up on an empty stage. A faint sound of splashing and running water from behind the bathroom door indicated that Marta was getting out of her bath. Presently there was a knock at the door on the right and Conrad's voice was heard calling: "May I come in?" After a pause, as there was no answer, Conrad opened the door and crossed the stage. He had changed into a white shirt and dress trousers and was carrying his dinner-jacket and tie with him. These he laid down on a chair and, going to the dressing-table, turned on the lights so as to be able to see himself while putting on his tie.

"Always dresses on the stage if he can," whispered the little man next to David.

David saw the double advantage of this imputed whim of the actor in the present case. It gave him an extra ten or twelve seconds in which to complete a very quick change, and his public

an occasion for admiring the grace of his figure and the perfection of his tailor's and shirtmaker's cut and style.

"Isn't he divine!" breathed one of the girls behind them.

"Pretty smart turn-out for a lit'ry chap," said the man at his side.

The criticism annoyed David as an instance of the realism of a limited outlook. Some of the best-dressed men he knew were writers. It was clear too that, in the play to come, there would be a juxtaposition of Conrad and the footman and that it was therefore dramatically sound to use every means of heightening the contrast between them. He wished people would not talk while a play was going on, and remembered, not without compunction, occasions when he had done this himself.

The actor made the most of this intimate, trivial, everyday moment. He knew to a second how long it would hold his audience; to a heartbeat how far he might take this exploitation of his own personal appeal as a man who for the moment might be the husband or the lover of every woman in the audience, caught off his guard; seen as she had the right to see him. At the same time, as

David was quick to notice, Lewis Keane, playing to his feminine public, had not lost his grip on Conrad Nuneham. There was an air of preoccupation, a vestige of the irritation of his nerves from the previous scene, in the flick he gave the tie he put round his collar and fastened and unfastened twice before it set to his satisfaction. There was something, more anxious than the natural vanity of a handsome man, in the lift of his chin as he took up a hand mirror and inspected his parting. Every gesture accomplished two objects; completing his toilet and leading up to the slight strain in his voice, uncertain of the reply to be evoked, as he took up his dinner-jacket, and, before thrusting his arms into the sleeves, called again:

"Marta! Marta!"

The door from the bathroom opened and Marta stood for a moment on the step that led down from it to the bedroom floor. She was smiling; restored and relaxed; come from the warm scented water in which she had been lying, with her nerves soothed, her temper washed away.

"So," she said. "It must always be at my mirror that you tie that stupid old bow."

"The light in the other room's wrong," he said. "They've put the writing-table where the dressing-table ought to be."

"The writing — it comes between us, and now it brings us together again." Her voice was honeyed and dulcet. She stood framed in the doorway, clutching the soft folds of her dressing-gown, which had slipped from one shoulder; her feet bare in their mules; her fair hair, a little disordered, falling in curls about her forehead.

Conrad did not smile, but his voice had lost its edge as he answered her.

"We must go down together. We mustn't seem to quarrel," he said. "I don't want my old friends to suppose that my lovely wife——"

"Am I lovely?" she interrupted him.

"Very lovely like that," he said.

"Then why must we go down to their stupid dinner? Can't we stay up here — just you and me — and have our dinner sent up to us — since I am now your so lovely wife and not cross any more?"

"My good child, this is not an hotel."

"It is not nearly so comfortable."

"Of course we must go down." He looked at his watch. "Look here, Marta, it is twenty minutes to eight. You've only three minutes to get into your frock."

"But it will take me quite twenty minutes. And besides I don't want to put on any frock, not now."

"Oh, Marta! Do be reasonable."

"Is it not reasonable to want to stay here with you?"

"The Rawlinsons have asked some people specially to meet us."

"To meet *you*."

"We can't not go down."

"Then you shall go alone to meet these invited friends. I do not want to see *anybody* — anybody but you . . ." She was close at his side, laying her cheek against his sleeve.

"Listen, Marta! We are late as it is. I must go down now. I'll tell Mrs. Rawlinson that you'll come along in five minutes."

"You refuse to stay with me now?"

"But . . . yes."

"You do not want to?"

"No," said Conrad, moving towards the window. "Not now."

"Why do you go that way?"

"It is a short cut to the library."

"Because Verity — she is there, out in the garden. That is why you will not stay with me."

"You know that is untrue."

But he left the window and crossed to the door.

"You will be sorry, Conrad — if you do not stay."

"I dare say. I often am sorry on your account. Promise me you will make haste and get dressed."

"Very well. But you will be sorry, Conrad. Come back and kiss me."

"I haven't time," he said, and vanished.

For a moment she stood looking after him. Then she moved towards the dressing-table, muttering to herself.

"'I haven't time.' No time! No time for me! Time for other people—time for writing—writing——"

She turned and looked at the dispatch-case, which still lay on the table on the further side of the stage.

"Time for writing—always for that—and with Verity. No! You shall be sorry there is no time for me."

She fumbled for a moment with the locks. Then she found the trick of them and they flew open. Slowly she raised the lid and stood like Pandora, peering into the box she had opened, a lovely figure, pink and white and golden, with a mask of rage.

There was a knock at the door and Alice the housemaid was heard speaking outside.

"Can I help you, madam?" she said.

"No. Go away. Go away!" The second "Go away" was almost shouted.

Marta took up a folio of the manuscript and looked at it.

"His writing and hers — one twining into the other — they are mixed — into one another," she whispered and made a gesture as if to tear the sheets across. But the paper was tough and resisted her frail hands.

"So!" she said, still in the same strangled undertone. "They will not come apart."

The dagger in the leather sheath caught her eye.

"It has a jagged edge," she whispered. "It still can cut and stab."

She knelt beside the table and putting one foot on the papers she held, slashed at them with the long green blade, cutting the sheets into narrow strips. When she had destroyed one handful, she stood up and pushed the fragments into the case again, taking out fresh sheets. She was laughing now, as she held the papers and thrust at them with the knife.

"You shall be sorry — sorry — sorry!" she cried at every stroke.

So intent was she on her work and so continuous was the hiss and rustle of the paper as she

stabbed and tore, that she did not hear the door behind her open.

Verity entered, dressed for dinner in plain dark red. In one hand she held an oblong piece of cardboard considerably larger than an ordinary playing-card. She crossed the stage and was beside Marta before the frenzied woman saw that she had come into the room.

"What are you doing?" said the girl.

"Ah! So he has sent you to spy on me."

"You told me to come to you at a quarter to eight."

"Then you shall watch while I destroy what is between you and your lover."

Verity neither resented nor denied the accusation. It was too false to hurt her. She had another urgency to meet.

"You devil! Give me that knife."

"Never till all the writing is in shreds!"

"Give me that knife, Marta."

The table was between them and Marta suddenly thrust down the lid of the case on the torn and untorn pages of the script.

"Go away! Go back to Conrad! Tell him to come and see what I have done—and when he comes it will all be burning. Hurry! They have not put a fire for me in my room. I shall make one

now. Before you can bring your lover here to stop me."

"Give me that dagger."

"Are you afraid I shall kill you with it? You half-caste whore."

With one hand pressed down on the lid of the case, she made a lunge at the girl, who caught her by the wrist of her upraised arm and twisting the dagger out of her hand, brought it down swiftly, savagely, deliberately just below the naked shoulder from which Marta's dressing-gown had slipped. The knife snapped, as Marta lurched away, leaving its long blade half buried in her flesh. For a moment Verity stood rigid and horror-stricken, gazing from the fragment of green metal in her hand to Marta, who took two swaying strides before she fell in front of the large easy chair that stood a little way up-stage from the table between it and the window.

"Marta!" she gasped in a flat, toneless voice.

There was a sickening cough from the body on the floor and then with a convulsive movement it lay still.

Verity went across to the place where Marta lay and looked down at her. Then once more she looked at the broken handle she still held. She closed her eyes for a moment and seemed to take

some counsel with herself, for her lips moved, but she was not praying. Then, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead, she groped her way to the window and stood there breathing heavily, before, with a fierce repudiating gesture, she hurled the dagger handle out into the night. Once more she came back to the body on the floor and, kneeling beside it, lifted one of its arms: it slipped and fell lifeless to the ground again. Then she rose to her feet, tossed back the bunch of her curls which had fallen over her shoulder as she knelt and, straightening her shoulders, walked out of the room.

In the silence which followed there was the sound of a window being closed and bolted and the rattle of curtain rings by someone in the dressing-room beyond the open door. Then the lights in the dressing-room were snapped off and Francis came in.

Crossing the stage with quick, furtive, soundless steps, he went straight to the dressing-table, and taking up the string of pearls, still lying where Verity had placed them half an hour earlier, he looked at them carefully, weighing them in his hand. Something about them, their weight or texture, seemed to strike him as peculiar. He raised them to his lips and then, with a queer half-smile,

laid them back in the place from which he had taken them. As he did so, he looked into the mirror. It was tilted at an angle that showed his face and reflected the floor behind him. On his way across the room he had passed above the armchair and had not seen the body lying beside it. He bent forward, leaning with both hands spread flat on the glass cover of the dressing-table. Slowly, with stiff, jerking movements, he turned his head and looked over his shoulder, turning his whole body into an angular symbol of Fear. Then, dropping to his knees, he crawled across the floor and peered at what lay there.

"Blood!" he said on a high whimper of terror, and drew back, staring with fixed eyes at the huddled body.

The tension was broken by a sound at the window. A man in a dark overcoat, with a black hat pulled down over his eyes, appeared on the balcony and gave a low whistle as if in signal to his fellow within. David noticed that his hands were gloved.

Francis scrambled to his feet.

"Beat it!" he said, "quick! There's been a murder done."

The figure at the window appeared to climb over the balcony rail and vanished. Francis went

quickly to the window, shut and latched it and drew the curtains across it. Then reluctantly, as if fascinated, he once more approached the body. The piece of pasteboard Verity had dropped in her struggle lay on the carpet and caught his eye. Mechanically he stooped, picked it up, turned it over in his hand and looked at what seemed to be a picture on one side. There was a sound of someone outside the window and Conrad's voice called:

"Marta! Marta! Let me in. Are you there, Marta?"

Slipping the card into his trouser-pocket Francis went back to the window. He stood listening to the blows that fell on the wooden frame.

"Let me in, Marta. It is I—Conrad!" shouted the voice outside.

Francis pulled back the curtain and raised the window-latch.

"What are you doing here?" said Conrad, as he stepped over the low sill.

The man opened his lips but no words came.

Then Conrad saw his wife's body. As he rushed towards it the tabs fell together for the second time.

This time when the house lights went up there was a good deal of applause. One of the girls

behind David suggested that they should go out for a cigarette, but the other pointed out that this was not an interval and that the Act had two scenes and that someone who had promised to come down to meet them would not do so until the end of Act I, if then.

"You know," the voice went on, "I don't believe she's dead."

"The wife? Oh but, my dear, she is and the husband will think that peculiar footman did it."

"Yes, darling, but you don't understand. Vera Paley *can't* be killed in the first scene of Act I. She's the leading lady."

"Oh! So you think she'll recover—or come back as a ghost and haunt them all."

"Recover—of course. Vera'd never do any high-brow spookery stuff. She'll be ill in the most marvellous *négligé*—and then there'll be a perfectly terrific love scene—and Lewis Keane will be her slave for ever—like the last Act of *Tiger Cats*."

"I never saw that."

"My dear!—too devastating! Didn't you adore the way he put on his tie?"

"And those marvellous trousers—coming half-way up the back of his dress shirt."

"Too Savile Row for anything."

"Oh, my dear — rather Jermyn Street, don't you think?"

The little man next to David gave a faint snort.

"What the public wants!" he said.

For the first time that evening David felt in sympathy with his neighbour.

A line on the programme announced that the second scene of the play took place concurrently with the latter half of Scene I. When the house lights were lowered the voices of the audience, as their chatter died away, seemed to be repeating themselves in the laughter and talk that were heard from the stage before the tabs parted to show the Library of the Rawlinsons' house at twenty-five minutes to eight.

The stage was set with double doors in the centre and a window opening on to the garden on the left wall opposite the fireplace. There were bookshelves round the wall and leather-covered easy chairs and low tables about the room. A large chesterfield stood between the double doors and the audience with a table in front of it on which books and papers had been pushed aside to make room for a pack of Tarot cards disposed in two piles of unequal size. Several of these lay face upward on the table. Four people were

grouped about the sides and back of the couch intent on the performance of a fifth—Cyril Grainger, played by Billy Vyse—a rather charming young actor with a slight lisp whom David had known at Cambridge and who was now making quite a success of small parts in drawing-room comedies. Madge Rawlinson in a dinner dress of copper-coloured lace sat on his left, her husband stood behind her, next to a tall thin woman in flowered chiffon—Lisa Thelusson, played by that elegant actress Geraldine Hunt.

Perched on the side of the chesterfield, one hand on the table, Verity leaned forward smiling as she studied the cards.

"Every card in the pack has a different picture on it," said Miss Thelusson.

"What have you done with the old boy holding a lantern?" said Major Rawlinson. "I liked him best. Can't I be that one?"

"No," said Mr. Grainger. "I've put all the trumps, Major, away. They're dangerous."

"Some of them looked positively terrifying," said Miss Thelusson. "I had ten minutes with Cyril's little book of information before you all came down and it simply bristled with threats."

"I wish you'd put these curious cards away. Cyril," said Mrs. Rawlinson.

"Oh! My dear!" protested Miss Thelusson.

"Till to-morrow. I don't want the Archdeacon to find us telling fortunes."

"They won't be here for another five minutes, Madge," her husband assured her, "and you've had your turn. It's mine now. What are you giving me, Cyril?"

"You can have the Emperor, if you like, but I'd rather give you the Knight of Swords."

"All right," said Major Rawlinson, as the young man singled a card out from the store before him. "What do I do?"

"Pack, shuffle and cut."

Major Rawlinson leant forward and taking the cards obeyed these instructions. When he had complained that the cards were too large and too rough to shuffle properly his wife asked:

"Why is George a knight and not a king?"

"Because," said Mr. Grainger pedantically, "kings are young and knights stand for men over forty."

"How d'ye know I'm not thirty-nine?" asked the Major.

"He looked in *Who's Who*," said Miss Thelusson. "Why swords, Cyril? Because he's a soldier?"

"No," said Cyril. "I'd have given him the

Emperor, only I don't like using the Greater Arcana for this sort of thing. That card means a kind of chivalry — benevolence — idealism — unworldliness — but *practical*."

"And dear George is President of the Society for Befriending Discharged Prisoners."

"How did you know that, Lisa?" asked Madge Rawlinson, as though she were not very well pleased at the disclosure.

"My dear — it's well known."

"Here you are," said Major Rawlinson, putting the cards down on the table.

Cyril Grainger drew a card from the cut pack.

"Nine of Swords — reversed," he announced. "Not very good, I'm afraid. Stands for suspicion against a doubtful character — or — well, that's all, unless you want to draw another."

"No, that's quite enough. Besides Verity hasn't had her go yet and Madge is getting restive. It's all right, Madge, we'll have this out of sight as soon as we hear the Bartletts' car coming up the drive. Come along, Verity. What is Verity in this picture gallery, Cyril?"

The young man looked up at the girl, who sat above him on the arm of the chesterfield.

"She's not very easy. A Page, of course. The Page of Cups, I think. Pentacles are too vivid.

'One to whom the images in the mind take form. Who acts her desires.' Will that do?"

"I think so," said the girl, taking the pack from Cyril and beginning to shuffle it.

"I should like to hear what you chose for Mrs. Nuneham," said Lisa Thelusson. "Queen, I suppose — Wands or Cups."

"Cups," said Cyril Grainger. "Reversed."

"May I look in the little book to see what it means?"

"You may *not*, Lisa. The little book says far too many things at once. It takes time and thought and a certain degree of intuition to read the Tarot pack correctly."

"You take yourself very seriously, my lad."

"Ready?" Cyril turned to the girl.

"Yes," said Verity, laying the cards on the table again.

"You know," said Cyril, "I think I should like you to draw a card for yourself. I've drawn so many uncomfortable ones to-night."

"You drew a terror for me," said Lisa.

"You deserved it, Lisa. But I don't want to give Verity bad luck."

"What favouritism!"

Cyril turned to the girl. "It's quite serious," he said.

"Spread them out, Verity, and shut your eyes. So. Now take one up."

The girl did as she was told.

"What a strange card," she said, "an arm stretching out from a cloud — stretching down." She held up the card.

"I'm sorry," said Grainger. "It means calamity — and through your own action. It's reversed, you see."

"Surely there is more than one meaning," said Lisa Thelusson.

"The other is — well, it is said to bring a certain clouded joy."

"Oh!" sighed Verity.

"Don't take it so seriously, child," said Madge Rawlinson, as Conrad came in. "There's Conrad. He'll not approve of such nonsense."

"What's that?" said Conrad, coming forward.

"Only a set of picture postcards Cyril has been showing us."

"A Tarot," said Conrad, taking up one of the cards. He stood behind Verity. "Is it French or Italian?"

"Neither — it's a thing from Hamley's," said Major Rawlinson. "Listen. There's the car. Pack up, Cyril."

"I'm afraid" — Conrad looked up at his hostess —

"that Marta's going to be a few minutes late. She's only just out of her bath. No Russian has any idea of time."

"Don't they dine in the small hours?" asked Lisa Thelusson.

"They did: before the Revolution, I believe, and Marta was brought up in those spacious years."

"Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett," announced the butler.

Verity had slipped from the arm of the chesterfield as soon as Conrad reached her side and, in the general movement caused by the arrival of the clergyman and his wife, she went out of the room unnoticed by anyone on the stage.

The entrance of the Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett, played by two very competent artists, was clearly a relief to the audience, which had seemed to feel the business of the cards a little difficult to follow. Their parts were written on rather conventional lines of high comedy; the Archdeacon being slightly pompous; his wife thin, elderly and confused in her dealings with the shawl, gloves and fan she carried. She twittered with her pince-nez, which seemed to find the bridge of her nose a slippery and uncertain perching-place. Introduc-

tions; observations on the state of the weather; some exchange of local news and one or two rather hortatory speeches from the Archdeacon, occupied the next minute and a half. The butler brought sherry on a tray. Conrad took his at one gulp. Setting down his glass on the table, he said to Mrs. Rawlinson:

"I think I'll go up and fetch Marta."

"I did tell Alice to go in and help her."

"Still, I'd better go myself. I'll go by the balcony. It's quicker."

Mrs. Rawlinson followed him to the window. "Oh," she said, "it has begun to rain." Then she added in a lower tone: "I do hope Marta is feeling a little less shy."

"Oh, yes," said Conrad. "I think she'll be all right now."

He went quickly out through the open window.

The talk went on. Cyril had taken the cards to the back of the room and was counting them over, aided by Lisa Thelusson. They had their backs to the door into the hall.

Mrs. Rawlinson was engrossed in her effort to entertain the newcomers.

Nobody took any notice of Verity, who came in at the door from the hall and stood saying, "Conrad! Conrad!" in an inaudible voice. She

crossed to Madge Rawlinson and tried to speak to her: but the Archdeacon had embarked on a rather involved rendering of a joke he had seen in last week's *Punch* — or was it the week before last's?

His wife thought it had appeared in the Summer Number.

Verity went up-stage to Lisa Thelusson and Cyril Grainger.

"I say, Verity," said the young man. "Did you give me back my Ace of Wands? I can't find it. Or did Conrad have it? Hullo! What's up?"

"I—I ——" said Verity; and fainted.

There was a little confusion. Major Rawlinson carried the unconscious girl into the dining-room, followed by his wife and Mrs. Bartlett.

In the silence which followed, the light, quick chime of a French clock on the mantelshelf struck eight.

"That girl's been under the weather ever since she arrived," said Cyril Grainger as the curtain fell.

## SHORT INTERVAL

THE little critic with the concave face pushed his way out past David without a word and vanished behind the glass and chromium doorway leading to the stairs, before David had risen to his feet to allow the older man, who, while the house was still in darkness, had begun to search for his stick beneath the stalls in front of him to go out into the gangway.

"Coming?" he said to David, as he hobbled past.

"Not this interval."

The old man grunted.

"I can't abide the fellow. Never could. Ought to be shot." He shook his head and went out.

David was not clear whether this wholesale condemnation referred to the author of the play; or to the old man's colleague, who had preceded him in what David supposed must be high dudgeon.

It was not until other people on his side of the row had decided to go out also that David, seated again, began to wonder if the marked collapse of

his fellow critic's hitherto friendly manner might be due to the failure of his emphatic prophecy that Marta would use the carefully planted dagger herself, and that, having betrayed fallibility before a novice, he could find no way out of his position but by rudeness, really the way to get deeper in.

The young women behind him had gone out and, isolated in a little field of empty stalls, David closed his eyes and began to consider his impressions. He had not got further than the realisation that Lewis Keane's smile as he faced Mary Archer at the close of the first scene; Mary Archer's white, wide-eyed dismay as her lips moved without uttering speech when she came back into the library, and the sharp angles of sudden fear in the footman's attitude before the mirror when he caught sight of the body on the floor, constituted for him the main dramatic values of the play so far, when a movement in the stall in front of him, which he had thought empty, made him open his eyes.

It was O'Hara, who had come across the house and, his arm along the back of the seat he had taken, was watching David with an amused smile.

"Hullo! Hullo!" he said. "Fallen for Mary Archer?"

David flushed and straightened himself.

"I'm puzzled to guess what's coming," he said. "The play seems over already."

"I told you," O'Hara began rapidly. "I said it was an early work. It sticks out all over. Look at all these properties! Suitcases; attaché cases; ropes of pearls; daggers; packs of cards; changes of dress for everyone in the cast and a two minutes' interval to do it in. Beany'd not have *looked* at such an amateur's work if he'd not known it was by Renishaw. I'll bet you half a crown there was a long scene while the girl put Vera Paley into some grand toilette—and they cut it, because the property man was overworked."

"I won't take you," said David. "You are sure to be right, and in any case I don't see how we're going to find out."

O'Hara took out his spectacle-case.

"Let's see," he said. "What's the play called?"

David was a little shocked, not at O'Hara's forgetfulness: he didn't for a moment believe that O'Hara had forgotten; but at this attempt to impress his listener by an assumed indifference.

"The Ace of Wands," read O'Hara. "What the devil! . . . Oh—that card! Prophetic bunkum. I said it was an early play."

"I don't think it's only that. The footman picked it up in the bedroom."

"What! What! I didn't see that. Philby's sitting next to me and he keeps on trying to find out what I think. He's out at the bar now, collecting other opinions for his patchwork. I've come round to you to escape them. Tell me again."

David told him.

"That settles it," said O'Hara. "Renishaw's based the play on the Brentwood Manor scandal. You're too young to remember it. Girl of good family killed her aunt, hit her on the temple with a riding-crop, and they hanged a stable-boy for it. Everyone knew he was innocent, but he was found in the loose-box with the crop in his hand — and the girl had an alibi. See the point?"

"Yes," said David. "What happened to the girl?"

"Married some colonial, I think. Anyway, she went off the map."

"What a beastly tale!"

"Plenty like it. Renishaw's dished it up with different trimmings."

"Too many trimmings, you suggest."

"What? Oh, the props? Yes. That isn't what I meant. But it's an early play of his all right. Put away till enough water had run under the bridges to make it safe to handle the same situation. But — I ask you — look at any other of his plays. Clean

work! Look at Galsworthy! What props are there in the first act of *Loyalties*? A note-book stuffed with shaving-papers; a bath towel; and a sponge; — and after that nothing but one solitary bank-note in Act III. There was dramatic economy, if you like! Whenever I see a play cluttered up with bits and pieces, I turn down me thumbs."

"I thought it pretty clean and direct," said David stiffly.

"Oh, it held the house. Stopped them shuffling their feet and crackling chocolate papers. But then a first-night audience will generally listen — unless they boo. I remember when I was a boy in Vienna at a Schnitzler first-night — *Anatol* it was."

The flow of O'Hara's reminiscence was interrupted by the return of the rightful occupant of the stall in which he was sitting. Other people were getting back to their places.

"Good sign," he said, "when the stalls fill up before the curtain rises on Act II. Come up to the bar and have a drink with me in the next interval."

David nodded a half-hearted acceptance of this invitation and O'Hara went out, meeting the lame critic in the doorway.

"Hullo, Dacres," he said, "blowing up for another *strafe*?"

The old man scowled but did not answer, and

as he pushed his way back to his seat, David wondered if so benevolent and fine a mask could really hide such malignant prejudice as was expressed in his utterances. David had heard other critics laugh over old Dacres and his phobias. It was a pity that the old man should have out-lived his capacity for that sane and impartial judgment a critic should hold to as the first and last qualification for his job.

The small man followed old Dacres almost immediately and David remained standing to let him pass. Either the drink he had quite perceptibly taken or the discovery of a fellowship in error concerning the fate of Miss Paley had softened his resentment against David, and as he settled into his place again, he observed sagely:

"Fine first Act. If he keeps it up he'll score another success."

"He will," said David cordially, more for the sake of accepting the tacit apology than because he agreed with the sentiment in which it was disguised. He had only just time before the house lights went down to look out the directions on his programme and to assure himself that the scene of Act II was still the library of the Rawlinsons' house and the time an hour later the same evening.

## THE SECOND ACT

THERE had been a rearrangement of the furniture since the curtain of Act I. The chesterfield no longer masked the double doors that opened into the dining-room, but was pushed over to the prompt side. The table on which Cyril Grainger had spread his cards was now placed down-stage on the spectator's right. A newly lighted fire was burning in the fireplace and the curtains were drawn across the window on the left.

When the curtain rose Major Rawlinson and Inspector Dobson were standing near the fireplace. The Inspector was a tall, dark man, alert and intelligent, who spoke with an educated though provincial accent and was evidently well known to the Major. A young sergeant of police, very pink and white and canary-coloured without his helmet, sat at the table, arranging papers and testing the point of an indelible pencil he had been sharpening.

"Do you mind seeing the Archdeacon now, Inspector?" asked Major Rawlinson. "I think he and Mrs. Bartlett would like to get away as soon as possible."

"I shall have to see the lady as well, sir."

"Could you see them together? They were not apart before this thing happened, or after."

"And they've not been about the house at all since?"

"No. No. Everybody went in to dinner with my wife—from this room. Bond, the butler, has waited on them single-handed. The other servants are together in the housekeeper's room with one of your men."

"Everybody but yourself and Mr. Nuneham, I take it."

"Yes. He's gone up with the doctor. Wait a minute. There is Miss Pearce. She was taken ill—fainted, just before Mr. Nuneham came down after finding the body. Mrs. Rawlinson took her upstairs and left her with our old nurse, who put her to bed."

"Can I get a deposition from her?"

"Hardly to-night. She does not know what has happened. She fainted before Mr. Nuneham came down."

"Here? In this room?"

"Yes: we were all together. A young friend who is staying in the house was amusing us with some picture-cards—a sort of fortune-telling, I am afraid—while we waited for dinner. Mrs. Nune-

ham was late. When the Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett arrived, Mr. Nuneham went up to tell his wife they had come and, just before he came down again, Miss Pearce fainted."

"And she had been in the room—for how long?"

"I found her here with my wife when I came down between twenty-five and half-past seven. They'd been settling the places round the dinner-table. Mrs. Rawlinson came down at seven-fifteen. I think Miss Pearce went down with her. Miss Thelusson and Mr. Grainger were out on the terrace and they came in and began to play with the cards and we three joined them."

"What time would that be?"

"Well before half-past seven."

"Can you give me any reason for fixing the time?"

"Yes: my wife was a little nervous about the fortune-telling. She wanted the cards to be put away before the Archdeacon arrived—and I looked at my watch and allowed them ten minutes."

"Got that, Wales?" said the Inspector, turning to the young policeman.

"Yes, sir. Five of the parties accounted for from seven-twenty onwards."

"This young lady that fainted—was she in

delicate health? *Miss Pearce* I think you said — unmarried?"

"Yes. Yes. She is my god-daughter. I don't think she is seriously out of sorts, but she had driven Mr. Nuneham's car all the way down from London this afternoon. She is acting as Mr. Nuneham's secretary and assistant in the work he is doing. It has been a hot day and I suppose she was a little overtired."

"Driven the car herself, you mean?"

"Yes. A little eye-strain, possibly. My wife said she had complained of a headache after tea."

"That seems to account for her all right, sir. I suppose the others will corroborate that she was here during the fortune-telling. Was there anything in that to upset her? Girls take these things seriously sometimes."

"No. I don't think so. To tell the truth I did not pay very much attention to what was going on. I was keeping my eye on the time and listening for the car. They were all laughing and talking together and discussing the pictures on the cards."

"Thank you, sir. Before the Archdeacon comes in I'd just like another word with you about the footman. It's the man on licence, I suppose — Francis Jones. I didn't refer to it when Mr. Nuneham heard me take his statement."

"Yes, Inspector, thank you. Mr. Nuneham, not unnaturally, having found him in the room, is persuaded that he is the murderer. You'll form your own conclusions, of course. But I know the man. I've seen him for some months now — since he's been on probation. If I'd not been convinced that he was not of the stuff that makes criminals, I'd not have taken him on here. My wife knows, of course, but no one else. We've got to be on our guard against arresting him on suspicion, just because of his record."

"Mr. Nuneham's asked me to charge him and I've had to say I'll keep him under special observation till the inquest."

"I know, I know. But Mr. Nuneham did not actually see Francis attack Mrs. Nuneham and there's no shadow of a motive. Mr. Nuneham does not know, as we do, that he's out on licence——"

"And after doing two years for a jewel robbery, sir."

"Not burglary. He was an assistant in a jeweller's shop and passed things out — it's not the same thing. We've got to be extra careful."

"Quite so, sir. And I'm more or less satisfied with his own account of finding the body. He seemed a bit nervous — but that was only natural. Mr. Nuneham was enough to upset anyone!"

"Naturally."

"Quite so, sir. I want to get times and alibis for your other guests as soon as may be."

"Yes, Inspector. Shall we have them in now?"

"If you please, sir."

"I'll go in and explain."

Major Rawlinson went up to the double doors, opened one of them and vanished into the dining-room.

"Just step out while we're waiting and see what Thomas and Bates have done about the garden and balcony," said the Inspector to his subordinate, "and tell Jones that the Archdeacon and his lady will be going in about five minutes' time, but that no one else is to leave the house."

"Very good, sir."

The young sergeant went out and the Inspector, crossing to the table, sat down and began to make notes. Then Major Rawlinson came back, holding open the door for Mrs. Bartlett followed by her husband. The Inspector, assuming the majesty of the Law, remained seated.

"The Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett will tell you anything you want to know, Inspector," said Major Rawlinson, drawing up two chairs to face the table.

"Good evening, sir. Good evening, madam," said the Inspector.

"Good evening, Inspector." The Archdeacon intoned slightly, as he sat down beside his wife. "A dreadful business. A terrible business."

"Yes, sir. I shan't keep you very long. Merely a formality so as to be able to release you and Mrs. Bartlett. As soon as Sergeant Wales comes back I will take your deposition."

"Thank you, Inspector. Thank you. Mrs Bartlett and I are only too anxious to help you."

"Here comes my man," said the Inspector, as Sergeant Wales re-entered, carrying a small object in his hand.

The Inspector exchanged a glance with him and the sergeant advancing to the table took up his place behind it, laying the thing in his hand on the table.

"I'll hear your report presently," said the Inspector. "For the moment I want you to take notes."

"Very good, sir."

"Now, Mr. Archdeacon. We are quite ready." The cleric cleared his throat.

"My wife and I," he began, "drove over from Diston this evening, starting at seven o'clock."

"Yes, sir. Who actually drove the car?"

"I did," said Mrs. Bartlett.

"Thank you, madam."

"We reached this house at sixteen minutes to eight."

"You are sure of the time?"

"As a matter of fact, I looked at my watch when we passed the lodge. It was then nineteen minutes to the hour. We had stopped the car for a moment. We were a few minutes late."

"Surely," said Major Rawlinson, "the gates were open."

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" The Archdeacon's tone was slightly apologetic.

"My husband," said Mrs. Bartlett, "does not wish to admit that I stopped the car on account of the wiper."

"The wiper, madam?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bartlett bravely. "It had begun to rain—and the glass was clouding. I always," she paused. "I always stop the car when I turn on the wiper—ever since I turned off the lights instead."

The young sergeant cleared his throat and grew red in the face but nobody smiled.

"Quite so," said the Inspector, making a note, "and you reached the house three or four minutes later. Who let you in?"

"Major Rawlinson's butler," said the Archdeacon. "We divested ourselves of our wraps in the hall."

"The butler remaining with you all the time?"

"Yes — oh, yes."

Mrs. Bartlett raised a hand. She was a conscientious woman.

"The parlourmaid took *my* cloak into the morning-room," she insisted. "I went with her to arrange my hair."

"Quite so. Make a note of that, Wales. It accounts for two of the servants."

"We were then shown into the library." The Archdeacon with a glance of rebuke to his wife took up the tale. "Into this room, in fact. Sherry was served and——"

"One moment, please. Do you remember exactly who was in the room when you came in?"

"Yes. The whole party — Major and Mrs. Rawlinson; Mr. Nuneham; Miss Thelusson; Mr. Grainger; Miss Pearce." The Archdeacon checked each name on his fingers as he spoke.

"Did you notice Mr. Nuneham leave the room?"

"I confess I did not. There were greetings and talk. Sherry was served, as I said. Then there was the little disturbance when Miss Pearce fainted,

and my wife helped Mrs. Rawlinson to get her into the dining-room."

"Were both the ladies out of this room when Mr. Nuneham came in and said that his wife was dead?"

The Archdeacon hesitated.

"I wasn't," said Mrs. Bartlett, seizing her opportunity. "Mrs. Rawlinson sent for a servant to help her take Miss Pearce upstairs and came back while Mr. Nuneham was trying to explain what had happened."

The Inspector made another note.

"After that?" he said.

"Major Rawlinson, very properly, asked us all to remain and to go into dinner with Mrs. Rawlinson, while he and Mr. Nuneham went to investigate — and — as you know — to telephone to — in short, for you."

"During dinner," went on the Inspector, "did you notice anything? Was anyone at all strange in manner? Did any one of the company attempt to leave the room?"

"There was, of course, a constraint, an absence of gaiety. But no one deserted."

"One more question. During dinner was the death of Mrs. Nuneham discussed at all?"

"Most certainly not in my hearing."

"No one attempted to suggest who the criminal might be?"

"The only suggestion of the sort was made by Mr. Nuneham when he came in and said he had himself discovered the footman red-handed."

"Thank you," said the Inspector, laying down his pencil. "That is all I need ask you now. You will, I take it, be available during the next few days. You may be called to give evidence at the inquest."

"Of course."

"Reginald!" said Mrs. Bartlett suddenly, as her husband rose to go. "You have forgotten something."

"My dear?"

"As we came round the bend to the front door I think I saw a man cross the drive."

"You so often see things of that sort, Marigold."

"One moment." The Inspector was alert. "Can you describe this man, madam?"

"Not very well. It was raining, I had the headlights on — so there was a deep shadow at the side of the drive. But I certainly did see a figure in a dark overcoat with the collar turned up and a hat pulled down. It might have been one of the gardeners, of course, but then he wouldn't have been in such a hurry."

"That would be about a quarter to eight."

"A little before. The clock in the hall was chiming the three-quarters as we came in," said the Archdeacon.

"Did Mrs. Bartlett draw your attention to this man when she saw him?"

"She said 'Oh!' but I thought it wiser not to question her at the moment."

"You saw nothing yourself."

"Nothing! As a matter of fact I had closed my eyes. My wife mentioned the circumstance as we went into the house as an explanation of — well — in short, the car had swerved a little."

"Quite," said the Inspector.

"I have never yet," Mrs. Bartlett spoke in tremulous self-defence, "never once actually run over anyone."

The Inspector gave a faint congratulatory smile.

"I think that is all we need trouble you for now," he said.

Major Rawlinson accompanied his guests to the door of the room.

"Now, Wales," said the Inspector. "Have you got those times down?"

"Yes," said the young man. "And Sergeant Bates has found footmarks on the balcony — only the rain has spoilt them a bit — and this, sir — in

the middle of the path just below it." He picked up the small object he had carried in.

It was the handle of the bronze dagger.

"No finger-prints after lying out in the rain — more's the pity," said the Inspector. "And I suppose the footmarks were Nuneham's: better get the shoes he was wearing before dinner. Tell Bates to carry on. I'll see the rest of the party in the dining-room and then we'll have the servants in."

"Very good, sir." The sergeant went out, returning a few minutes later, while the Inspector was talking to Major Rawlinson, who now came back from the hall and joined the Inspector at the table.

"Do you think there was anything in Mrs. Bartlett's story?" he asked.

"Possibly. There's always the chance that some outsider got in and killed the poor lady to prevent her raising the alarm. These jewel robberies have been happening while the families were at dinner."

"I know. I had given special instructions that the housemaid should close the upstairs' windows while we were at dinner and that she should take the footman round with her in case anything of the kind were on foot. But the robberies have all been on the other side of the county so far."

"I know, sir — and out of our sphere of operation. But there's been *someone* outside. One of my men found this on the path." He handed the dagger haft to the Major. "Queer-looking object, sir. Can you make anything of it?"

Major Rawlinson turned it over in his hand.

"It's Egyptian," he said, "of the Third Dynasty. I've got one rather like it myself, but smaller. Mr. Nuneham, I believe, has brought one of unusual size and shape to show us."

The Inspector raised his eyebrows. There was a pause.

"Well?" said Major Rawlinson sharply.

"I suppose, sir," the Inspector spoke slowly, "I suppose you couldn't tell me if this Mr. Nuneham was on good terms with his wife?"

"Look here, Inspector!"

"I know, sir. But this is murder and we've got to face facts."

"Mr. Nuneham has already told you that he left his wife alive and well and that, five minutes later, when he went back to her room he found the footman alone with the body."

The Inspector tilted the chair he was sitting in back on its legs and drummed with his pencil on the letter in front of him.

"It's an axiom in the force," he said, "that the

murderer generally tries to fix it on some other person."

"But Mr. Nuneham gave the alarm himself."

"Many of them have the presence of mind to do so."

"Mr. Nuneham is one of my oldest friends."

"We can't take that into account, sir."

"But you've no real evidence."

The Inspector turned to his notes.

"The evidence so far shows that Mr. Nuneham is the last person to see his wife alive. He was not in this room for at least six minutes after Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett arrived. He went out, according to Mrs. Rawlinson's evidence, by the window, though she drew his attention to the fact that it was raining—and we find the handle of the weapon with which the victim was murdered on the ground outside the balcony. He gave the alarm himself and he wants to arrest a person who—you yourself agree, sir—though not above suspicion in other ways—seems to have no motive—and not to be the kind of criminal who does his victim in."

"Yes, but no more is Mr. Nuneham."

"He may have had a motive."

"You'll need a good deal more evidence before you can reach that conclusion, Dobson."

"Yes, sir, I grant you. It's only a theory so far."

"You can't disregard the possibility that it was the work of someone outside."

"No, sir. I am bearing that in mind. Perhaps we'd better be getting on with the evidence. I'll finish with your guests and then take the servants Who is there left, sir?"

"My wife. You've heard her story. Miss Thelusson and Mr. Grainger."

"And the young lady—Miss Pearce—upstairs."

"The other evidence accounts for her."

"Quite, so far as her having an alibi for the twenty minutes in which we know the crime was committed—but I'd like to hear what she has to say about the relations between Mr. and Mrs. Nuneham."

For the first time since the opening of the scene, David's attention shifted from the story it was developing to the acting of the parts. Up to this moment the playing had required nothing much more than the adequate and straightforward treatment each player had, in turn, given it. Now James Dawlish's characterisation of the simple and kindly Major Rawlinson made a more searching demand on the actor's reserves. He rose to it in

the pause before his next speech, showing, in rapid succession, the man's inbred distaste of a situation in which any girl could be questioned on such a theme; his own suspicion that all had not been well between his friend and the wife who, until a few hours ago, had been a stranger to him, and his determination, even at the cost of an incomplete sincerity, to use the obvious loophole for escape. David had no time to do more than appreciate, without analysis, the changes of expression; the shifting of pose; the movement of a hand towards the pocket which held his cigarette-case and the rejection of the idea of smoking, which all contributed to the effect of a mute debate, before the actor spoke again.

"Of course," said Major Rawlinson, "there may be something in Mrs. Bartlett's evidence. She may have seen a stranger."

"I didn't put much weight to it myself," the Inspector took up the dagger, "until I saw this. We'll have to wait now till the doctor has finished upstairs, and make sure it's part of the weapon used by the murderer. If so, we may find ourselves working on the line that this was done by one of the jewel-robbers. So far I believe they've nothing much to go on in the other cases. Don't

seem to be able to trace them to any of the people known to us."

"Shall we have Miss Thelusson and Mr. Grainger in now?"

"Yes, sir."

Major Rawlinson went up to the dining-room door and, opening it, called : "Lisa!"

Geraldine Hunt, who played Lisa Thelusson, came down the stage conveying adroitly the impression of a woman of the world who was not taking the situation in which she now found herself very much to heart.

"Do you mind if I stand up?" she said, as Major Rawlinson offered her a chair.

The Inspector looked at her sharply.

"Just as you please," he said. "I shall not detain you many minutes. You are, I believe, staying in the house."

"Yes. I came down on Thursday."

"You know Mr. and Mrs. Nuneham?"

"I know Mr. Nuneham well. He is a distant cousin. But I have never met his wife."

"You did not see her when she arrived this evening."

"No: Mr. Grainger and I played tennis after tea and I went straight up to have a bath before dressing for dinner."

"What time did you come down?"

"Soon after a quarter-past seven. Mr. Grainger had promised to show me his Tarot cards."

"You came straight to this room?"

"No: we sat on the terrace for some minutes and then came in to find a table for the cards."

"Who was in the room when you came in?"

"No one. Mrs. Rawlinson and Miss Pearce were in the dining-room arranging the table. They came and joined us."

"You saw both these ladies? You are sure Miss Pearce was with Mrs. Rawlinson?"

"Oh, yes. The doors were open. Miss Pearce was down before I was. I know because I had to wait a minute or two for the bathroom. Miss Pearce said she wanted to get down early to help Mrs. Rawlinson."

"Who came in next?"

"Major Rawlinson and then Mr. Nuneham — some minutes later."

"You cannot tell me to a minute when Mr. Nuneham came down?"

"No. We had all been busy over the cards. But when he came he took up some cards Mr. Grainger had been reading for Miss Pearce. It must have been well after seven-thirty, because just then Major Rawlinson heard the Bartletts'

car in the drive and Mr. Grainger cleared the cards from the table in rather a hurry. I helped him."

"Did anyone come into or go out of the room between the time when Mr. Nuneham came down and the time dinner was announced?"

Miss Thelusson looked surprised.

"Yes. I thought you knew. Mr. Nuneham went out to fetch his wife."

"Did he go out by the door?"

"No, by the window. There are steps up from the terrace to the balcony outside Mrs. Nuneham's bedroom. It was shorter for him."

"You saw him go out?"

"No. I had my back to the window. But I heard Mrs. Rawlinson call after him that it was raining."

"How long was he out of the room?"

"Five or six minutes at least. We had sherry and Mr. Grainger ran through his cards while Major and Mrs. Rawlinson talked to the Bartletts, and then Miss Pearce came over to where we were standing by the window and helped us with the cards just before she fainted. While we were getting over that Mr. Nuneham came back and told us what he had found. Major Rawlinson went upstairs with Mr. Nuneham and — after a few minutes — we all went into dinner. All but Miss Pearce."

"You saw Miss Pearce before she fainted. Have you any idea what upset her?"

"None. There was nothing to upset her — then. Mr. Nuneham hadn't come down. She was standing with us by the window. We were trying to get the cards into the box and some slipped to the floor. Mr. Grainger had missed one or two and was a little fussed about it. I knew she'd had a bit of a headache. I gave her some aspirin tablets when she came out of the bathroom."

"Her room was near yours?"

"Yes — the end one along the corridor past Mrs. Rawlinson's. The bathroom is between them. Mr. Grainger had the room opposite, next door to the Nunehams'."

The Inspector looked at his paper.

"Yes — the one marked D on the plan. And you say Miss Pearce and Mr. Grainger went down before you."

"Yes! I heard Mrs. Rawlinson call, 'Verity, are you ready?' as I was dressing, and Mr. Grainger used Major Rawlinson's bath because Miss Pearce was in the other bathroom when we came up from tennis. Major Rawlinson was the last to come down as he'd had to wait for his bath."

"The last but one."

"Oh, yes — Mr. Nuneham was the last."

"That leaves Major Rawlinson and Mr. and Mrs. Nuneham upstairs between seven-twenty and seven-thirty-five."

"About that, I should think."

"Thank you, Miss Thelusson." The Inspector turned to Major Rawlinson. "I don't think we need detain the lady for the inquest, sir."

"Oh — but——!" Lisa Thelusson was evidently a little disappointed at the prospect of missing an excitement.

"I am sure," said Major Rawlinson gravely, "Miss Thelusson will be only too glad to be relieved of so painful a duty."

"*Dear George!*" said Lisa Thelusson, as Major Rawlinson showed her out of the room by the door leading to the hall.

"She'll not leave the house to-night?" queried the Inspector.

"Oh, no."

"Mr. Grainger?" The Inspector read the name from a list.

"May my wife come in at the same time? There's no one else left in the dining-room now."

"Certainly," said the Inspector.

Mrs. Rawlinson entered, crossed to the fireplace and stood there looking down and listening

carefully while Cyril Grainger's evidence was taken.

"Will you tell us, Mr. Grainger," said the Inspector, "exactly what you did from the time you came in after playing tennis with Miss Thelusson up to the moment of going in to dinner this evening?"

"Yes," said Cyril, "I will." He spoke quickly and with a faint air of having a grievance.

It was, David gathered, annoying to so frivolous and amusement-loving a person as Cyril Grainger to find himself mixed up in a serious matter. He seemed inclined to blame his entertainment; to find in this murder, which was spoiling the week-end, a breach of hospitality. Renishaw had differentiated his minor characters well, thought David, even though at the time of writing, according to O'Hara, he had lacked experience as a dramatist.

"I came in after tennis and had a drink before I went up to dress. After I'd had a bath there was a bit of a bother because I couldn't find my shirts. I always wear soft shirts and the man who valeted me had put them away with my pyjamas."

"I'm sorry, Cyril — we've got a new footman," put in Major Rawlinson.

"I know — the man who's been run in."

"Pardon me, Mr. Grainger." The Inspector interposed. "No one has been run in yet. How did you find your shirts?"

"I had to ring for this man."

"For the footman. How did he strike you when he came?"

"Not as a particularly bright specimen. He seemed confused and a bit out of breath. Said something about having to come up the long way round as there was a lady in some room or other. What with two of them in the bathrooms and another blocking up the passage, you know, traffic was a trifle on the congested side."

The Inspector consulted his plan.

"I see." The Inspector turned to Major Rawlinson. "The service staircase comes up opposite the door to Mr. Nuneham's dressing-room and then another staircase leads up to the second floor. How would he get down to room C if he did not pass through A and B, sir?"

"Through a passage and down a small staircase at the far end of the corridor beyond Room C, Miss Pearce's bedroom," said Major Rawlinson, bending over the plan on the table. "This is an old house and has been added to at various times. There are altogether five separate staircases in it, but only four of them are in general use."

"I take it these two between the first and second floors would be here and here." The Inspector made marks on the plan.

"Yes. The fifth goes up to the attics and lumber rooms and the door leading to it is kept locked."

"We'll go into that later if necessary, sir. Now, Mr. Grainger, how long did the footman stay with you?"

"I was in the room with him for five or six minutes while I finished dressing and found out where he had put my things. He got out my Tarot for me."

"Your what?"

"A set of cards. Reproductions of those used for an ancient method of character-reading. I was going to show them to Miss Thelusson."

"Oh yes—yes. She spoke of them. When did the footman leave you?"

"I left him. I was in a hurry and my things were sprinkled all over the room after the man had unearthed what I wanted. I told him to put my things where I could find them myself and went down."

"Leaving the footman in your room."

"Precisely."

"And then?"

"I found Miss Thelusson on the terrace and we went in together to the library. Mrs. Rawlinson and Miss Pearce came in and I explained the cards to them and gave a short demonstration."

"Sort of conjuring trick?"

"No." Cyril was annoyed. "Interpretive Divination. Owing to the circumstances a quite superficial business."

This did not interest the Inspector.

"And while you were playing this little game Mr. Nuneham came in?"

"Yes," said Cyril, "and he picked up several of the cards and disarranged my lay-out."

Once more the Inspector passed over the statement.

"Did you notice anything marked in Mr. Nuneham's demeanour?" he asked.

"No. But now you ask me, Inspector, I remember that on the way down I did hear something going on."

"When?"

"As I passed the door of Mrs. Nuneham's room on the way down I heard voices."

"An altercation?"

"Something of the kind. Voices — rather brisk they were."

"You are sure it *was* Mrs. Nuneham's room?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, the door is just opposite to the head of the staircase and I stopped to look at the name on the card. I had to put on my spectacles to read it — and being near the door I heard voices inside."

"What was being said?"

"Really, Inspector. You can hardly suppose that I *listened*?"

"No, no. Of course not — but you heard voices. How many?"

"Two, a man's and a woman's."

"Was one of them Mr. Nuneham's?"

"I suppose so."

"You are not sure?"

"Well — Major Rawlinson was in his bath, as I had good reason for knowing, and I was on the landing. It couldn't have been the butler or the footman — so who else could it have been — in Mrs. Nuneham's room?"

"Quite so. That would be about seven-twenty, I take it."

"More or less."

"From the moment when you came from the garden with Miss Thelusson until the time when the murder was announced by Mr. Nuneham, did you see anyone leave this room?"

"Nobody but Mr. Nuneham."

"Thank you, Mr. Grainger. That will be all for the moment."

"Can I go to bed?"

"So long as you do not leave the house you can do what you like."

Cyril rose from his chair.

"I say," he said, "there's one thing — nothing to do with Mrs. Nuneham's death, of course — but one of my Tarot cards is missing. I've counted them twice since dinner. It may have slipped down behind the curtain when we were packing them up. Or Mr. Nuneham may have dropped it. He took up those Miss Pearce had drawn and cut just before you called time, George. Madge" — he turned to Mrs. Rawlinson — "would you ask the servants to look out for it when they do the room in the morning?"

"Yes — yes, Cyril." Mrs. Rawlinson was surprised and a little impatient.

"Thanks. You know what they are like."

He opened the box he had carried in his hand through his examination and held out a card. "It's the Ace of Wands. Rather like this one — only a flowering rod instead of a sword in the hand. The back is mottled green and white."

"Yes! Yes! I'll explain to the parlourmaid. I'm sure it will be found."

"If I'm not wanted again, I'd like to motor Lisa up to town first thing in the morning and I'd like to have my pack complete. It's Sunday and I've promised the Fergus Mackinnons . . ." Cyril's voice grew shriller as he spoke. Major Rawlinson crossed to him and put a hand under his elbow.

"Good night, Cyril. We've got several more people to examine," he said, almost driving the young man to the door.

"Thinks a lot more of his parlour tricks than of the poor lady lying dead upstairs," said the Inspector, as the door closed on Cyril Grainger's exit.

"Who will you see now, Inspector?" Major Rawlinson was not going to make any comment on Cyril's manner, which indeed he understood better than the Inspector did.

"I think it had better be the girl who waited on Mrs. Nuneham. Your butler said he sent the footman upstairs with her just before dinner."

"Yes. It was my order. I wanted to be sure that all the windows were properly bolted — as a precaution. Not that I really supposed the jewel thieves would get so far north as this. But with guests in the house . . ."

"Quite so, sir. Wales, go down and tell the Sergeant to let — what's the girl's name?"

"Alice," said Mrs. Rawlinson.

"Let Alice come up."

"Very good, sir," said the sergeant and left the room.

"How long have you had this housemaid?" the Inspector asked Mrs. Rawlinson.

"Alice? Nearly a year. She is an excellent servant. I have left my own maid behind in London this week-end and she was maiding me and Miss Thelusson as well as Mrs. Nuneham, so she had her hands full."

"She'd be upstairs and in and out of the bedrooms all the time, then?"

"Yes. She put out my things and I sent her on to Miss Thelusson and told her to go to Mrs. Nuneham as well. And then, as soon as we had all gone down, she would do the three rooms — no, four. There was Miss Pearce's."

"How long would that take her?"

"About half an hour, I should say. There would be a few minutes' delay if she went round all the rooms with the new footman, but they should both have been downstairs by eight-fifteen."

The Inspector made a note.

"Do you want me to stay while you question her?"

"If you think it will make the girl more comfortable . . ."

"No. I think Alice will be quite happy if Major Rawlinson is here. I rather wanted to go up and see how Miss Pearce is getting on."

"Quite."

The sergeant came in again.

"The doctor has finished now," he said, "and would like to have a word with you upstairs."

"Coming. Keep the girl in the hall till I'm ready for her."

"Very good, sir."

The two men left the room together.

"One moment, before you go to Verity." Major Rawlinson crossed to the fireplace and stood beside his wife. She looked up at him.

"Poor old George," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "It is very rough luck on you when you've trusted the wretched man and tried to give him a chance."

"That's like you, Madge: but the Inspector does not think Francis did it."

"What a relief!"

Major Rawlinson shook his head and looked into the fire for a moment.

"The alternative is worse," he said slowly.

"Suicide! I've thought it, whenever I could begin

to think about it at all. She was all on edge — really not quite sane. I told you while we were dressing.”

Major Rawlinson looked at his wife.

“We shall hear what the doctor says. They always take that possibility into account. But that is not the Inspector’s line, I’m afraid.”

“Tell me.”

“Madge — those two — Conrad and his wife — were thoroughly on one another’s nerves.”

“George!”

“You heard what Cyril said about hearing them quarrel.”

“But he *can’t* . . . it’s impossible!”

“This afternoon we should have said it was impossible that anyone could come by a violent death in our house.”

“George! You haven’t told the Inspector that they did not get on well?”

“My dear, I noticed how careful you were not to give that impression when he questioned you before you went into dinner. I have said nothing to alter that.”

“What are we to do?”

“We must wait now till Dobson has finished. He’s got to see Alice and then I suppose he’ll take the other servants’ evidence. Bond has made his statement accounting for the rest of the staff.”

"And Conrad?"

"He took Conrad's statement first — when he accused Francis."

"It seemed so obvious. I was so dreadfully sorry for you, George."

"Don't, Madge. I brought this on you by insisting on having the man here. You've been an angel about it."

"I suppose angels are absolutely truthful. But I'm not going to give one particle of evidence against Conrad, whatever happens. And you won't either."

Major Rawlinson drew a deep breath.

"You know, Madge," he said, "I dare say you made a poor dinner — but it's getting on for ten — and I've had nothing since luncheon. Do you think you could get Bond to send me in something? Sandwiches and a half-bottle of Pommard?"

"My poor George! Of course. In here?"

"Send Francis up to the dining-room with a tray. I'd like to have a word with him."

Mrs. Rawlinson looked at her husband.

"I'm glad I gave Verity that sleeping tablet," she said.

But Major Rawlinson did not return his wife's glance. He seemed to be debating with himself and half afraid of what he was prepared to do.

The Inspector came back.

"The doctor has finished, sir," he said, speaking rapidly. "Death was instantaneous. The knife went in just below the collar-bone and pierced the heart before the handle broke off. It's the one the Sergeant found in the garden, sir. The parts fit. Mr. Nuneham has recognised the weapon."

"Could it? . . ." faltered Mrs. Rawlinson.

"No, madam. Not self-inflicted. The party who killed her was standing in front of the victim and must have delivered the blow from above. I shall have to get the body taken down to the dining-room presently. Ready for the inquest."

"Can't she stay where she is?" asked Mrs. Rawlinson.

"I'm afraid not. We shall want to lock both the rooms for further examination."

Mrs. Rawlinson turned to her husband.

"And Conrad," she said, "where shall we put him? In your dressing-room?"

"We'll settle that later, Madge."

Mrs. Rawlinson went out of the room, and, instructed by the Inspector, Sergeant Wales brought Alice the housemaid in from the hall.

"Now we shall have some fun," said the little man at David's elbow, in anticipation of the con-

ventional maidservant of farce. But to David's relief Renishaw made no use of this well-worn method of easing the tension of an examination scene. Alice the housemaid was in adequate control of her aspirates and her colloquialisms gave colour to her part without raising a laugh at her expense. Renishaw had used her in this scene for the purpose of introducing an important piece of evidence.

It was quickly established that the footman had gone upstairs in answer to Mr. Grainger's bell, while Alice herself was tidying Miss Pearce's room after that young lady had gone downstairs with Mrs. Rawlinson. She had helped Miss Thelusson to fasten the clasp of her pearl necklace; had tidied Mrs. Rawlinson's room and had then called Francis into the bedroom to fasten the window there. They had gone round together fastening all the windows.

"Did you go downstairs with the footman?" asked the Inspector.

"No, sir. We came out of Major Rawlinson's dressing-room together and while Francis was taking a hot-water bottle for Mr. Grainger across the landing to his room, I saw Mr. Nuneham come out of the bedroom door and go downstairs."

David glanced quickly at James Dawlish. The

actor was standing up-stage above the table, and faced the audience. At the sound of Conrad's name there was a visible quickening of the attention with which he listened to the proceedings.

"When was that?"

"I can't be sure to the minute, but it was well gone half-past seven. The stable clock struck the half-hour while me and Francis was doing the bedroom."

"And then?"

"I went and knocked at Mrs. Nuneham's door."

"What did you do that for?"

"Mrs. Rawlinson had said I was to ask Mrs. Nuneham if I could help her, and seeing Mr. Nuneham was gone down, I did so. So I knocked and she said I was to go away."

"She spoke to you."

"She shouted, 'Go away!' twice."

Major Rawlinson drew a breath of relief. Marta had been alive when Conrad left her. Conrad had already told them so — he had been speaking the truth.

"Yes. I went down the corridor to Miss Pearce's room and me and Francis shut and bolted the window. Then I said if Francis would go and shut

up in Mr. Nuneham's dressing-room he could get in by the door in the passage and I'd meet him in Mrs. Nuneham's room to see that the window was properly closed as soon as she'd gone down."

"How long would it take Francis to get from Miss Pearce's room to the dressing-room?" asked the Inspector, making rapid notes as he spoke.

"He'd have to go up the stairs to the second floor—and along the gallery and down to the passage. A couple of minutes, perhaps. But he didn't go right away because we'd forgotten to see to Mr. Grainger's hot-water bottle."

"What was the matter with it?"

"Nothing, only we had a bit of a job to find it."

"Did you take the hot-water bottle?"

"No, Francis did. I went back to turn down Miss Pearce's bed."

"Did he take the bottle down to fill before he went into Mr. Nuneham's dressing-room?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I went along to Mrs. Nuneham's bedroom, same as I'd said I would, and there was Mr. Nuneham dragging Francis with him and shouting to me to send for a doctor."

The Inspector laid down his pencil and looked at Alice for a moment in silence. Then he said, casually:

"You are sure that is all you can tell me?"

"Well, sir." Alice hesitated. "There was one more thing, but it's not very much."

"Out with it."

"Before I went along to Mrs. Nuneham's room for the second time, after I'd finished Miss Pearce's, I went into Mrs. Rawlinson's room to make sure that the little window by her bedside was properly shut. I couldn't be sure I'd done it, and while I was in the room I thought I might as well sort over some things I'd brought up from the laundry after tea — only a few minutes it took me — but I did think I heard a door on the landing open and close. 'That'll be Mrs. Nuneham going down,' I said to myself."

"You did not go out to look."

"No. Mrs. Rawlinson's door was open and I heard the sound as I said. But I didn't think nothing of it at the time."

"Did you hear anyone go downstairs?"

"I shouldn't, not over the carpet, unless I'd been listening hard — and besides the laundry paper rustled a bit and that'd drown it."

"You are quite sure you heard it?"

"Quite sure, sir. But I wouldn't be certain *which* door."

The Inspector took up his pencil again.

"And that," he said, writing, "would be shortly before a quarter to eight."

"Just after, sir. I looked at Mrs. Rawlinson's little clock and it showed ten to and I thought, 'They're all gone down now.'"

"How long would that be after Francis left you?"

"I couldn't say to a minute. It was well after half-past seven when we began to look for Mr. Grainger's hot-water bottle, and it was close on eight by Mrs. Rawlinson's clock before I left her room. I can't tell you any nearer than that."

The Inspector consulted his plan of the rooms.

"Francis was found in Mrs. Nuneham's room," he said. "The windows were shut. Are you sure it wasn't him you heard going in?"

"I don't see how it could be. He went up the stairs at the other end of the passage, and I told him, most particular, to go through into Mrs. Nuneham's room before I got there, if he was quite sure she'd gone down, and then to close the windows."

"Hum!" said the Inspector and made another note. "Then it would not be correct to say that the footman had no business in Mrs. Nuneham's room at ten to eight or a little after."

"No, sir," said Alice firmly. "It would not."

The Inspector stood up.

"I'd like to go over the ground myself, to time it. I suppose that will be all right now, sir."

"Yes," said Major Rawlinson. "I don't suppose anyone is in bed except, of course, Miss Pearce. You don't need to disturb her."

The Inspector consulted his plan.

"She's in room D. No, that'll be all right. I'll take the maid with me to reconstruct her tale, before I see the footman again."

"Shall I come with you?" asked the Sergeant.

"No. You'd better go and see that nobody interferes with anything in the bedroom when the doctor leaves."

"No objection to Francis waiting in here till you are ready for me, Inspector?" said Major Rawlinson with a significant look. The Inspector returned his gaze. It was clear that the Major was seizing an opportunity and that the Inspector was not quite sure why he wished to do so. While he deliberated, Sergeant Wales went through the double doors into the dining-room, leaving them ajar.

"Not that I can see, sir," said the Inspector, gathering his papers together.

"I thought of having some food while you are

upstairs and I should like the man to wait on me," said Major Rawlinson in a rather guilty tone.

"Quite," said Inspector Dobson and followed Alice out of the room.

Major Rawlinson went up to the table, on which the Inspector had left the blotter and a few sheets of writing-paper, and moved them aside, handling them slowly, with his thoughts elsewhere. Then, raising his head, he called:

"Francis!"

There was a movement beyond the double door and the footman appeared.

"I think Bond has got a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of wine for me. Will you bring the tray in here?"

His matter-of-fact tone was still careful, but now it implied a care of another kind. He had been attempting to put the Inspector off the scent: he was now trying to assert his authority as master to servant as a means of reassuring that servant.

The man did not move. He stood in the doorway, his hands hanging at his sides, his head thrust forward, his face white and threatening. It had been a mistake on his master's part to make an appeal to a training in service, which, in the case of Francis, ex-convict and shop-assistant, had never existed.

"Am I a prisoner?" he asked. "Tell me that."

"Not for the moment," said Major Rawlinson. "Bring in that tray."

"Because," said the footman, and stopped. Then he went back to the dining-room and returned with the tray in his hands.

"Put it here. And close those doors."

The man obeyed.

There was a slight increase of dignity in the footman's bearing, as though he had in some way assured his own position or come to terms with himself. The suggestion was not conveyed by any particular trick or gesture, so far as David could make out, but seemed to emanate from an inner secret that was communicated to the audience only because its existence was known and cherished by the actor, or, to be accurate, by the man the actor had become and had never ceased to be, during his absence from the stage.

Major Rawlinson shook out his dinner-napkin, bit into a sandwich and with a nod indicated his wish that the footman should pour out wine from the bottle, already uncorked.

As the man did so, the Major paused, his sandwich half-eaten, and watched the hands that took the bottle and tilted it against the glass; watched

and listened for a clinking of glass on glass, a quickening of the breath the footman drew, as he bent a little over the table close to his master's side. But the man's hand was steady, his breathing easy and controlled. He filled the glass to the required height and straightened the bottle without letting a drop fall on the polished table or on the white cloth which covered the tray. The master relaxed his attention; but the man had been aware of it. As he replaced the bottle on the tray, their eyes met for a moment and the footman looked down, veiling his gaze, his face unsmiling, almost insolently demure.

In the few seconds the silent drama lasted, the two men had changed places with one another. It was the master now who was no longer sure of himself: the man who knew the direction what was to follow would take.

Major Rawlinson finished his sandwich at a mouthful and drank some wine.

"I want to tell you," he said, "before the Inspector questions you again, that no one else except Mrs. Rawlinson and myself knows that you are out on licence. No one in the house."

"Thank you, sir."

"I am particularly anxious that Mr. Nuneham should have an opportunity of recovering from

the shock he has just undergone, and I want you — for your own sake — not to let your quite natural resentment against him influence your manner presently."

"He has accused me of murder, sir."

"I know. That is why I am asking you — if you like to take it that way — as a favour to me — to be on your guard."

"Against Mr. Nuneham?"

"Against yourself. The Inspector is most unwilling to make an arrest on the evidence so far. You will imperil your own position now if you show animus against Mr. Nuneham."

"I did not kill her."

"I am prepared to believe you."

"I have been accused." The man spoke quickly, vindictively.

Major Rawlinson had slipped.

"I had better tell you that the Inspector has evidence which suggests that the crime was not committed by anyone inside the house."

"Have they caught him?" The man's question was sharp, spoken on an indrawn breath. He too had made a slip.

"Do you think they will?" The advantage was now with Major Rawlinson.

The man shook his head.

"How should I know? If they do, we shall all be cleared."

"Exactly, Now we are *all* under suspicion."

At that moment the doors to the dining-room opened to admit Conrad Nuneham. He was pale and his hair was in some disorder. He walked slowly, almost with a limp, as though the shock he had suffered had robbed him of some degree of muscular control.

Francis assumed a defensive attitude.

Major Rawlinson rose from his chair and made a step in his friend's direction, as if to go to his aid.

"What is it, Conrad?" he asked, "can I do anything for you?"

"No. I want to speak to Francis."

"Here he is. Do you want to see him alone?"

"No. There should be a witness."

For a moment it was seen that Major Rawlinson suspected some further accusation. The footman was less perturbed.

"Francis," said Major Rawlinson quickly. "Ask Sergeant Bates to come in here. You'll find him in the hall."

The man made a movement towards the door, but Conrad Nuneham, limping forward, with the faintest suggestion of a smile, said:

"It's all right. You won't need help. I have come to make a confession. That's all."

"A confession?" There was a note of warning, not of suspicion, in Major Rawlinson's tone. "Conrad!"

"I was wrong. The Inspector has made me withdraw my charge. He has proved the impossibility of it. I have come to say so."

Without waiting for any reply from either of the men who stood listening in relief and astonishment to the words he had spoken in a faint mechanical voice, Conrad limped across the stage.

There was something at once sinister and ironical in the footman's expression as he reached the door in time to hold it open for Mr. Nuneham's exit. When he had gone out, the man did not immediately close the door behind him but stood looking after him, still with the same strange look on his face, until Major Rawlinson, who had re-seated himself at the table, called sharply:

"Francis!"

"Yes, sir."

The man closed the door and returned to the table. He was more agitated than he had yet been. Major Rawlinson refilled his glass himself.

"After that," he said, "there is no further need

for me to ask you not to make any wild counter-charge when Inspector Dobson sees you. In fact, I do not suppose he will do more than ask you to corroborate certain points in the evidence he has already taken."

He was clearly talking in order to give himself an outlet for the emotion Conrad Nuneham's admission had caused him.

There was a pause. The man's mind was working quickly. His right hand moved to his trouser-pocket and slipped into it as though clutching something there. Major Rawlinson saw this gesture.

"Well?" he said at last.

"It wasn't Mr. Nuneham!" said Francis.

"What makes you say that now?"

The man was silent, savouring his moment.

"Francis." Major Rawlinson's tone was almost humble. "You know that I am responsible for you — that you are here because I have undertaken to see you through the term of your sentence."

"I know, sir. I am not ungrateful."

"Hadn't you better tell me what you know?"

The footman moved a step nearer to the table.

"After what Mr. Nuneham has said to clear me, I wouldn't say what I know. Unless it was only a

blind. But if that Inspector takes it into his head to search me, he'd find it."

"Find what?"

"If I tell you, sir, will you give me your word that you'll not use it except to clear me?"

"What is it you have got?"

With a quick movement the footman drew his hand from his pocket and held up the card he had taken from beside the body on the bedroom floor: held it high, guarding it with both hands; standing on tiptoe; ready to run for safety with his treasure.

"This!" he said, tapping the now slightly crumpled piece of cardboard.

A movement stirred the audience as opera-glasses were raised, and those who did not need or did not possess them leaned forward in the effort to see the object clearly.

From his seat in the third row of stalls, David who was long-sighted, made out that the card measured about two and a half by four inches and was painted with a representation of a red staff blossoming like Aaron's rod, held by an arm outstretched above a hilly landscape or a tossing sea. This, then, was the *Ace of Wands* from which the play derived its title. For the first

time that evening David pencilled a note on his programme.

Major Rawlinson sprang to his feet and leant across the table staring at the card.

"But," he said, "that is the card Mr. Grainger has lost."

"I know," said Francis.

"Where did you find it?"

"By the body."

"You said nothing to the Inspector when he took your first statement."

Francis did not answer in words, but the look on his face was at once crafty and triumphant.

"Was it before or after you closed the window?"

"After. Before Mr. Nuneham knocked."

"How did you know it belonged to Mr. Grainger?"

"I saw the pack when I was setting out his things this evening."

Major Rawlinson left the table and went to where the footman stood, the card in his now lowered hand, in the centre of the stage.

"In that case," he said, "since you admit having touched the pack in Mr. Grainger's room, it might be suggested that you yourself dropped the card where you afterwards found it — after."

"After?"

"After the murder."

The man's triumph ebbed away, leaving him bewildered.

"But," he faltered, "it proves that—someone did go into the room——"

"It proves nothing, except your foolishness in supposing it could clear you from suspicion to say that you had found it by the body."

"But it belongs to Mr. Grainger."

"Mr. Grainger has a complete alibi. For all we know Mrs. Nuneham may have had a Tarot pack of her own."

Francis shook his head and made a movement as if to return the card to his pocket; then, looking up under his eyelids into Major Rawlinson's face, he held it out to him.

"It belongs to the murderer," he said.

Major Rawlinson took the card and laid it face downward on the table.

The rhythm of the conflict between the two men changed. They no longer opposed one another, each hiding an unspoken purpose behind the words of their questions and answers, but fell apart as wrestlers, who relax their hold, though neither has as yet vanquished his opponent. Francis withdrew into an apathy, partly of ex-

haustion, under the cloak of which he hid a secret and unstilled fear. Major Rawlinson, his fear still living, was relieved that he had for the moment delayed a catastrophe he might yet be able to avert.

"Better take the tray now," he said. "The Inspector will let Bond know if he wishes to see any of you again to-night."

As Francis reached the door, it opened and Mrs. Rawlinson came in. The footman stood aside to let her pass and she stopped and spoke to him.

"Inspector Dobson does not wish to take any more statements to-night," she said. "You may go about your duties as usual, but no one is to leave the house until after the inquest on Monday."

"Very good, madam! Good night, sir!"

When the man had closed the door, Madge Rawlinson crossed the room and took up the same attitude by the fireplace as she had done earlier in the evening. She did not see her husband slip the Tarot card into his pocket.

"They've found two sets of footprints on the balcony," she said. "One of them is Conrad's."

"So Mrs. Bartlett *did* see someone in the drive." She nodded.

"Inspector Dobson is satisfied that it was not Francis," she went on in a despondent voice. "He

is now working on the idea that this is connected with the jewel robberies."

"Thank God!"

Madge Rawlinson looked up at her husband, who had come to the fireplace and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the dying fire.

"George," she said. "Cyril Grainger's asked me about that Tarot card again."

"He'll find it to-morrow."

For a moment it seemed as though he were going to tell her, but before he could speak there was a sound of heavy footsteps from behind the dining-room doors and a man's voice could be heard issuing directions.

"What's up?" The Major raised his head.

"They are bringing her down."

"Conrad is in there."

"He wants to spend the night near her. I gave orders for a bed to be made up in here. He says he shall not sleep, but I shall have some rugs and pillows left on the couch."

Inspector Dobson came in from the dining-room, his note-book in his hand.

"I think I've done all I can to-night," he said. "We've taken finger-prints. The only ones in the bedroom are those of Mr. and Mrs. Nuneham and

a couple of complete hands on the glass of the dressing-table, which the footman admits he made when he caught sight of the body in the mirror, while he was looking for the switch to turn off the light."

At the mention of finger-prints, Major Rawlinson's attention quickened. He turned his head sharply and just saved himself from letting his hand stray to his pocket in which the Tarot card now lay.

"None of Mrs. Nuneham's jewels is missing," the Inspector went on, not seeing the Major's start. "Nothing has been taken out of the case but some pearls. Looks as though the footman had startled a jewel thief when he came into the dressing-room. I'll leave a couple of men outside for the night, just to see that no one messes up the paths before we can examine them by daylight for footprints."

While he was speaking, Mrs. Rawlinson exchanged a glance with her husband and went out of the room.

"Thank you, Dobson," said Major Rawlinson, "I'm glad you've got something to work on. Who will you want for the inquest?"

"You and Mrs. Rawlinson and Mr. Nuneham and the footman and the Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett. To-morrow I'll see if any of the outdoor

servants can give us anything on the man who was seen in the drive."

"I hope you get him."

Inspector Dobson closed his note-book and snapped the elastic band round it. "I hope we do," he said, and, going up-stage to the double doors, added:

"I've locked the dining-room door leading to the passage on the inside, but there doesn't seem to be a lock here. We'd better lock this room, sir."

"Mr. Nuneham wants to sleep here to-night—or to watch."

"Bit nerve-racking. Still, I suppose that will be all right. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Inspector."

The Inspector went out by the door leading to the hall. When he had gone, Major Rawlinson stood for a moment in thought. Then he walked up-stage, opened one of the double doors and listened.

The room was in silence. Closing the door softly, he came down-stage and, taking the card from his pocket, held it under the light of a shaded lamp on the table and examined the surface, breathing on it slightly and turning it edgeways. Then, coming to a decision, he polished the surfaces on

each side of the card with his handkerchief and returned it to the place from which he had taken it.

The house darkened as the tabs fell together and there was a perceptible pause before any clapping began.

"Poor curtain," said the little man.

"Oh, I don't know," said David. "It was a good gesture and it doesn't finish the Act."

"What I mean——" the little man persisted; but David was not to hear his elucidation. A growl from Dacres conveyed his opinion that the scene was badly in need of cuts and the little man, turning to agree with him, left David to his own reflections. He had been quite sufficiently interested in the rise and fall of suspicion, as each witness added some fresh light on the investigation, but was conscious of a faint sense of disappointment that the play seemed to promise nothing more than the complications of a detective story. They were half-way through the second Act and no central conflict had established itself. Major Rawlinson clearly had tampered with the Tarot card because he believed it might carry evidence against Conrad Nuneham; but there seemed no prospect of a development of that situation—it was not a situation, only a gesture,

theatrically effective but not dramatically significant. The real problem, the plight of the girl who would wake to find her innocence taken for granted, had not been developed yet. He looked at his watch — nine-forty-five — and the long interval to come — they must ring down soon after eleven: the play was already half-over.

The tabs parted and crinkled up into festoons above a darkened stage.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, lit only by the fire which had been banked up in order that it might burn slowly and last out the night, it was seen that no one was on the stage. The double doors were closed: the curtains drawn across the windows. Two white pillows and a rug had been arranged on the chesterfield, making of it a bed; its cushions now lay heaped together on the floor. The firelight gleamed on a siphon and decanter standing with glasses on the table where the Inspector had sat while he took the statements an hour earlier. The French clock on the chimney-shelf struck as it had struck at eight o'clock, closing the first Act. Its quick, light chime served to emphasise the silence of midnight and, once again, sounded the same note of Time that is and is not

measured by a mechanism impersonal and unrelenting. It was, thought David, as he counted the strokes, it was clever of the producer to select this frivolous, this almost flippant timepiece to point a tragic scene. A less sensitive imagination would have chosen a deeper bell, a gloomier note. This light tinkle, shallow as the laughter of a foolish woman answering an insincere flattery, brought back for a moment the scene before dinner with the laughing, chattering group on the chesterfield, bent above the pictured symbols which, once the arcana of a recognised mystery, were now become the playthings of unbelieving superstition.

A beam of white light cleft the background of the scene from floor to ceiling: someone had begun to open the double doors behind which the body of the murdered woman now lay. The shaft widened as the door swung inward and Lewis Keane stood in the narrow space, his head thrown back against the edge of the door, his eyes closed, his lips moving silently. He had taken off his dinner-jacket and the stiff shirt he had put on with so much effect in Act I and now wore a dressing-gown of some thin dark material with a shiny surface that glistened a little in the light, so that

its folds were outlined as if by moonshine. The line of his throat and chin, the backward sweep of his hair from his forehead, showed as if cut in marble. His left hand, thrown backward, held the door-knob, clutching it with rigid intensity.

The pose was superb; the tall, beautifully proportioned figure leaning against the wooden door seemed that of a martyr bound to his stake. Black and ivory and dulled silver, the lines of his gown repeated the perpendicular shaft of the narrow opening in which he stood. It was a picture, composed, significant, alive. For the first time in the play the authentic vibration of tragedy possessed the stage. So, thought David, the actor should be painted by some master painter: so, perhaps, his namesake Kean might have held his pose—or the gaunt figure of Irving might have stood, though Irving's head would surely have fallen forward, hiding his face in the shadow of his grief. The emotion stirred by the actor translated itself into a chain of related memories. The swirl of cloud and drapery; the twisted tragic boughs of a leafless tree against the sky of Cranach's *Karfreitag* in the Alte Pinakothek, as he had seen it in Munich when he was a boy, passed before David's vision, hiding the figure on the stage—or rather raising it for an illusory second

to the pitch of another and an auguster anguish and then dropping it to the memory of a woman's gesture not many days ago, when he had seen her accept a sudden trivial disappointment with just such a throwing up of chin and closing of unhappy eyes. Queer that these two memories, one from art, the other from life, should now in an instant supply him with touchstones by which he recognised the truth of this actor's interpretation and helped him to gauge its sincerity.

What other pictures — what differing memories, he wondered, was this silent eloquence stirring in the people around him? Were they, as he was, diverted from the story about to continue its course by the beauty of this sombre pause in its movement?

The door below the fireplace on the prompt side opened and Major Rawlinson entered; he looked round the room and turned to shut the door behind him, closing it softly and with deliberate care, but letting the latch click as it fell into place as a signal to the man he had come to visit that he was not alone.

Conrad had heard. His arm dropped from the door to his side. He turned his head and opened his eyes.

"Madge wants to know if you have everything you need," said Major Rawlinson.

Conrad came down to the table and turned on the standard lamp.

The stage was now more fully lit so that the white column of light from between the doors no longer threw shadows on either side of the opening.

"How good of her," Conrad said in a toneless voice.

"Would you like me to sit up with you?" asked the other.

"For a little — perhaps."

The two men stood together, one on either side of the table-lamp; its shaded light beat upward into their faces, reversing the shadows on their features, so that they looked older, worn and anxious.

"If it is any sort of comfort to you, Conrad," Major Rawlinson spoke diffidently — "I think the police are fairly sure that no one in this house did it. You are not under the roof that shelters her murderer."

"And if I were — it would not lessen my own part in it."

"Your part?"

"She asked me to stay with her. She wanted me not to go down to dinner. If I had listened —

if I had not been angry — this would not have happened."

"You could not have known."

"I could have been more patient."

"When death comes to part us we all feel that," said Major Rawlinson. "It is never of our forbearance we repent."

Conrad shook his head.

"If I had stayed with her," he repeated in the same dull tone, "it would not have happened. If I had stayed with her! And now I must wait and search and work till there has been another death. A life for a life — no, a death for a death. There is nothing left for me but that. I left her — and now I must make myself a murderer. She was alone — I left her — so I was her murderer. She had two murderers. Soon there will be three — when the hangman has done with him. My life work — to hound a man to death."

"Society and Justice will do that — for its own protection." Major Rawlinson spoke uncertainly, ashamed of the truism but finding no better words.

"They have covered her face," said Conrad. "They left her in the dark. But I have turned on a lamp for her. She cannot sleep in the dark. She always has a lamp burning at her bedside. Marta is afraid of the dark. There was no fire in her room.

She asked me for a fire. She was unhappy in rooms where no fire burned. Now I must hound a man to death because she died in a room where I would not have a fire made for her."

He sat down in one of the easy-chairs by the fireplace and buried his face in his hands. Major Rawlinson went to the table and poured out four fingers of whisky: then he dropped in a couple of white pellets and squished out a little soda.

"Better drink this," he said, carrying it over to the chair.

Conrad looked up.

"Shall I?" he asked, as a child who is ill might ask the nurse who offered him a draught.

"I'll have one too," said Major Rawlinson, and he went back to the table to mix himself a less potent brew.

"Now, then, Conrad," he said, lifting his glass.

Conrad drank the mixture in three gulps.

"I'm thirsty," he said.

"Have another."

"No, thank you." Conrad paused, looking into the empty tumbler. "Did you put anything in it?" he asked.

"Only some of Madge's sedative tablets: she thought you'd need them."

"I don't want to sleep."

"You probably won't. But it will do you no harm to drowse a little."

Conrad stood up.

"I feel better already," he said. "The singing in my ears has stopped. Did I talk nonsense just now?"

"You've had a shock, man."

"I suppose it's that. I felt—I still feel—reluctant to face the consequences. If any effort could bring her back——" he hesitated. "It's this business of pursuit, of hounding down, of taking another's life."

"You feel no impulse to avenge?"

"Avenge? That's a queer word. Justifiable Revenge. Are we justified in seeking it? A desperate man kills my wife because she has surprised him in some act for which—if he is caught—he will be punished: but his wife—his child—am I too to become his murderer? I have my own grief. Must I take his guilt as well?"

"Conrad—your first impulse was the natural one. You seized the footman whom you found with the body—you were prepared to kill him then with your own hands."

"That was fear—that was the old savage answer of blood to blood. Now you tell me the man is innocent. I have been saved from my own darker

impulse—the natural one, you call it. I tell you, George, it was fear. I pushed my own guilt away from me. I had been angry with her, and another man had carried the work of my anger to the point I had not the honesty to take it. It is the first authentic cowardice—to see the thing we might have done and to cry ‘Another did it!’ The criminal—who is he? He is everyman—the scape-goat of us all.”

Conrad’s voice faltered. He looked into the fire, closing his eyes, and once more the mask of suffering, now lit from below by a warmer light, stood out against the shadows beyond his chair. Then, his eyes still closed, he began to speak again:

“I read a poem the other day by a German—a translation. A murderer was speaking to his Judges. The last lines of it drum in my ears now:

Is none of you ever afraid  
Of what every one of you,  
Every one of you,  
Every mother’s son of you  
Might so easily do?”

There was a pause. Major Rawlinson cleared his throat. He was not prepared to follow his friend into these wandering speculations. His face, as he stood beside him, looking down into the

fire, showed pity and tolerance, but also a profound disagreement which it would, at such a moment, be idle to put into words. Then, a question arising in his mind began to trouble him. Was it possible that these were, after all, the self-exculpatory arguments of actual guilt? His hand went slowly to the pocket-book: without drawing it out, he said in a matter-of-fact voice:

"Conrad. I'm not really changing the subject. Did you know that Grainger had lost one of those cards he was playing with before dinner?"

Conrad opened his eyes, blinking a little. Madge's sedative was beginning to work.

"Cards!" he said. "What cards?"

Major Rawlinson took the pocket-book out, opened it and withdrew the card.

"Do you remember seeing this one?"

Conrad leaned forward and looked at the card held out to him.

"Yes," he said. "It's the one Verity showed me."

"Did you take it from her?"

"I don't remember. May I look at it?"

George Rawlinson gave him the card.

"I remember something about it." Conrad's tone was puzzled but not very much interested. "Where is Verity?" he asked, not giving back the card.

"In her room — asleep, I hope. She fainted while you were out of the room."

"Then she doesn't know . . ."

"Madge has not told her."

"You say she gave me this?"

"I asked you if she did."

"I don't think so. Is it important?"

"It may be. Grainger wants it back. He has missed it from his pack."

"Why haven't you given it to him?"

"He had gone to bed when I . . . when I found it."

"Well?"

"I think it will be simpler for you to give it to him yourself in the morning."

Conrad's eyelids drooped, he raised them with an effort.

"Very well," he said sleepily. "In the morning."

"Hadn't you better get on to that couch, old man?"

George Rawlinson spoke cheerfully, relieved now that he had accomplished his double purpose of giving Conrad a sedative and of placing the one dubious scrap of evidence in his hands to deal with it as he chose.

Conrad nodded.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea."

He rose from his chair and moved across to the chesterfield, where George helped to make him comfortable.

"Like to have a light by you?" he asked, and taking the lamp from the table, he carried it down-stage, the flex trailing behind him, and placed it on the floor within reach of Conrad's hand.

"Queer bit of business with the lamp," whispered the little man, as Rawlinson left the stage, "I wonder what it has been done for."

"I wonder," murmured David, not attempting to express his own recognition of the change in lighting effected by this simple and obvious gesture. The pillar of white light between the still-unclosed doors in the centre of the background now showed faint and grey like the plinth of some vague funereal monument. The light from the shaded lamp on the ground made a round pool on the rug by the chesterfield, and threw a diffused circular glow upwards, changing the shadows of the room. On his way across the stage Conrad Nuneham had paused by the table and had laid the Tarot card there. In the stillness after Major Rawlinson had gone, it was possible to see the oblong of pasteboard, a pale shape on the polished

rosewood, where the shaft of light from the open doors fell across the stage.

His little neighbour's question raised another in David's mind. Was it, he asked himself, a necessary preparation for something to follow which had dictated that shifting of the lamp from table to floor? Had Renishaw the dramatist written the line which accompanied Major Rawlinson's action in placing it there? or had the producer, seeking for just this effect of shaft and circle to illuminate the darkness of the scene, asked for words to justify the change, and was that effect, thus obtained, worth the risk of starting just such an expectation as the critic at his elbow now entertained? His own answer was clear enough. Even if no development of the situation hinged on that shifted lamp, the shadow it threw over the now quiescent figure on the couch was at once satisfying and symbolic. David remembered how, some months earlier, in a play in which a man desperately ill was being nursed with the very extremity of devotion by a wife who had the reiterated praise of a doctor to endorse her every gesture, he himself had lost all sense of such illusion as the scene should have produced because the sufferer lay tossing in the unshaded glare of a light hung immediately over his face. Beany had not made such

a mistake as that. Conrad, if he was to sleep, was to sleep in shadow, and if he was to lie waking, was to lie under a shadow that momentarily at least typified his state.

The door opened slowly and someone came in from the hall, closing the door softly again and pausing by it, a dim shape muffled in some long pale robe, unrecognisable in the darkness. Conrad stirred on his couch and then started up wide awake, bringing his face into the circle of lamp-light.

"Verity!" he called.

She came towards him, holding her hands out before her with a groping gesture, though her eyes were open.

David had a flash of misgiving. Were they on the brink of a sleep-walking scene? Had this young and untried actress been cast for the part of a twentieth-century Lady Macbeth? Then he saw his mistake — and possibly the effect of the girl's inexperience. She was using her hands to screen her sight from the glow of the lamp on the floor, so that she could make her way across the room. Once understood, the gesture, graceful in itself, was seen as significant also. Young and inexperienced Mary

Archer might be, but she was actress enough to be able at this difficult moment to bring with her on to the stage the sense of what Verity Pearce had been through since her last exit. She was a changed, and at the same time a more resolute creature than she had been. David had seen so many actresses resume their parts after an interval: this one had developed it while she was unseen and had herself lived through the experience of the girl who now stood by Conrad's side. He had raised himself from his pillows and was sitting upright on the couch, the rug thrown back: his arms lay along his knees, his face was raised and lit by the upward beating of the lamp on the rug at his feet.

"This room is all different," said Verity, "and *you* here! Can you tell me if this is a dream?"

"What are you dreaming, Verity?"

"I *was* dreaming. Then I woke. I came down to tell you about Marta."

"Marta is dead."

"Then you know?"

"Yes."

"But you were not here. The room was full of people. I could not make them understand. Cyril and Lisa Thelusson were here. He asked me for the card I had drawn—and then—it was like an earthquake. Everything fell together—lights and

people and voices. I suppose I fainted. And just now, when I woke, I was upstairs in my room — in bed. So I came down again to be sure I had told about Marta."

"Listen, Verity. There was an attempted burglary. Marta was killed. We think she saw the man and tried to give the alarm and he killed her. You didn't dream it. It is quite true."

She only heeded one thing he had said.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"What am I going to do with myself? They seem to think I need to be revenged, that I must help them to find the murderer."

"That is quite easy, Conrad."

"It will not bring Marta to life again."

"Do you want her back?"

He nodded with closed lips.

"Conrad! She cut your book to pieces. She tore the script with the dagger. It was your work, Conrad. She wanted to destroy it."

"I know," he said, "what does it matter now? She is dead now."

He clasped his hands loosely, leaning forward, gazing into the past. "Marta, who was so much alive!" He sighed. "I saw her for the first time when she was a refugee in Paris. All the others were worn and broken with their exile—but

she was like a flower that had only just been torn from its stem. It was so easy to make her forget. It was like taking one of those closed anemones that come from the South with shut petals and hanging heads. Put them in water, and in an hour the petals have unclosed. Marta was like that. Like a flower. She was colour and fragrance. She made my life — it had been dry and austere — she made it what life should be, vibrant, exciting; an adventure, not an effort."

He was reliving halcyon days. The girl listened to him, aghast at the change that had come over him, amazed by this evocation of a woman whose existence she had not even surmised. With her amazement relief and indignation grew, and as Conrad went on with his reverie, overcame it.

"It was years ago," she protested.

"Years gone." He took up her words, changing their significance. "Years to come. They pass. They cannot destroy. There is change — and the unchangeable remains. There were years before she came — and the years when she was there. Once — in our garden — there were rose-trees. I was proud of them. But she brought me an armful of wild honeysuckle from the hedges. 'This grows as it will,' she said, 'no-one prunes it — or takes away its freedom — and it has the sweeter scent.' "

"She was jealous of your rose-trees," said Verity.

"Her hair was like honey, like the deep golden honey of Hymettus. She had an ivory comb. There was a little gold coronet on it. It had belonged to her mother. When she combed out her hair it fell over her arms — it fell to her knees. She wrapped it round her shoulders like a shawl."

"She was a witch," said Verity.

"One day the comb snapped in her hair. She cried till her hair was wet with her tears — wet and dark. She was unhappy for days because her comb was broken. I could not make her forget it. I tried to get her another — but I could buy nothing. . . . It was a Russian comb, and now, in Russia, they do not make such things. She was angry when I brought her another ivory comb with no coronet on it."

"She was vain and selfish," said Verity.

"At night she kept her lamp burning. She was afraid of the dark. There are candles round her now."

Conrad was speaking more slowly. His voice grew husky with sleep.

"Conrad! Where is she? Why are you here?"

He turned towards the double doors.

"She is there," he said. "They brought her there

— afterwards. I am — I am watching with her. She shall not lie alone in the dark. She was always — afraid of the dark. So I have come to watch near her. I cannot sleep while the lights are burning — and she cannot sleep in the dark.”

His head fell forward, his hands fell apart, he swayed sideways. Verity moved quietly and stood behind the couch.

“You must sleep now,” she said, “and leave her in the light.”

She laid her hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently back until he lay among the pillows. Then she spread the rug over him. When she was sure that he was asleep, she went up to the double doors and closed them with averted head, fearing to see what lay beyond them. For a moment she stood, her face against her arm, leaning on the door.

Coming down-stage again, she stopped, and, taking up the lamp from the floor, carried it back, still lit, to the table. As she placed it there, the light fell on the Tarot card. She took it up and looked at it carefully, passing her hand across her forehead in the effort to remember. Presently her brain cleared. The events of the evening reshaped themselves in her mind.

“But,” she said, “I drew this card myself.”

It was clear she had no further memory of it.

She moved slowly down-stage and whispered, "Conrad!" but there was no reply from the couch. She crossed the stage and stood by the table again, looking at the card.

The light from the open top of the lamp-shade beat up on her face, showing the changing expressions that passed over it, as she debated with herself. Her white face seemed to hang on the darkness as a mask hangs on a wall. She looked towards the couch.

"Perdition — by your own deed," she said, and her whisper thrilled through the house, filling the silence up to the last seat in the gallery. With a blind, groping movement, she stretched her hand out behind her towards the doors, beyond which the body lay.

Then, taking the card in both hands, she tore it across and across, and, hurrying to the fire, she crouched in front of it, putting the fragments one by one into the glowing coals. The flare of their burning lit her face and showed it, once more twisted with the fury of destruction. When the last of them had fallen into ashes, she stood up with a sigh.

"And a certain clouded joy," she said.

She looked towards the couch where Conrad

lay, breathing slowly and regularly as a man breathes before he passes into deepest and soundless sleep.

After a long pause she went to the table and turned out the light. In the glow of the dying fire she could be seen, a shadow, making its swift way out of the room.



## INTERVAL OF TWELVE MINUTES

O'HARA stood with his back to the bar, his elbow on the counter. In one hand he held the cigar he must have lit on his way up from the stalls, in the other he waved a glass tankard, already half emptied.

"Mixed; Pinero and Maeterlinck," he said. "Date, Nineteen-O-Two or thereabouts."

"With a dash of J. M. Synge or Yeats," lisped a very tall thin man in spectacles, who was drinking tea.

"Nonsense!" snapped O'Hara. "There's no Celtic twilight about it! It's pure nineteenth-century drawing-room drama. Same situation as Sardou's *Fédora* with a bit of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* destroying a manuscript."

"That's all very well, O'Hara," said a young man with very light eyes and hair, "but by internal evidence it's post-war. The murderess was a Russian fleeing from the Revolution with an Arch-duchess's pearls in her pocket."

"Nothing but trimmings," snapped O'Hara.

David ordered a black coffee, and, avoiding

Dacres, muttering vindictively to a group of his middle-aged colleagues, joined Hepburn, the critic of the *Signal*, who had beckoned to him.

"Uncomfortable sort of play," said Hepburn. "I liked that long investigation with each new witness drawing another red herring across the trail: but I gather O'Hara found it tiresome."

"It's very well produced," said David.

"Beany's always so good at distributing movement. Did you notice how seldom any two consecutive entries or exits were by the same door? I remember one first-rate play—one of these continuous ones in one set and the action uninterrupted. It was ruined by the way every entrance and every exit was made by a door up in the corner on the prompt side, though there were two possible ones in the set—and by a table down by the footlights. The fool producer had put a telephone and address book, also cigarettes and a tray with drinks on that damn table. Every man and woman in the cast drank and smoked and telephoned, some of them twice. On entering or leaving the stage they all moved down to or up from that table till they must have worn a track on the carpet. By the end of Act II everyone in the audience was bored, though the action of the play was thrilling enough. Didn't know that what tired them was the

constant repetition of journeys to that blasted table."

"What happened to the play?"

"Came off at the end of a week. Nothing but bad production. Look at the way a good modern ballet holds the audience! Half of them don't know a thing about dancing. They're amused and excited by the pattern — the continual movement towards and retreat from a focus of interest which shifts a little, but not too much, and is constantly approached from a fresh direction. The ballet-master does not need to explain why his ballerina comes in on one side and goes off on another and re-enters down- or up-stage: he is concerned to balance his pattern. The producer has a rather more difficult task. He has to rationalise his movements. The audience doesn't realise it. We laugh now at the old *Palais Royal* farce with six doors, each with a character hidden behind it: but it was easy to produce and to watch."

"I hadn't thought of it," David admitted, "but of course we need breath and pattern — to fill the picture. I suppose it's neglect of that particular disposition of movement that makes some plays look as if the stage were only half filled most of the time."

"That — and incompetent acting."

"This play's beautifully acted. Very well cast too."

"Well—that's a question. I'm not so sure that it was wise to put Vera Paley on for one act only. The public's used to seeing her work up through a play to some spectacular scene late in the evening. Will they stand her absence through two acts? They know she's dead but they probably can't believe it. The habit of expectation, especially with a first-night crowd, is a queer thing. Dangerous to baulk it. You may set up a feeling of dissatisfaction—lose your hold on attention that way."

"I thought the re-creation, in the last scene, of the woman she had been was good," said David. "So often you are left wondering why any man ever could have been held by the sort of woman she was in Act I. It always seems to diminish the interest in the man himself to show him married to a vixen. It seems to me that Renishaw's psychological insight—the way he used the effects of an awful shock—was quite convincing. Keane did it beautifully too."

"Oh, Keane's a charmer," Hepburn admitted. "His diction is a model to all the young fellow-me-lads who go on the stage and imitate his smile and the way he saunters across a room. How do

you like the girl? I hear Beany's had to teach her everything. But she's a good pupil."

"She has a lovely diction too," said David. Then, feeling suddenly unable to discuss this actress apart from the play, he went on: "The part's a bit baffling. Are we meant to suppose she's going to get away with a murder?"

"For the moment, certainly. It was made quite clear that they'd both of them been drugged a bit."

"I didn't much like that device. It weights a part too much. Like madness. Madmen on the stage never quite convince me—the madder they get, the more I say to myself, 'It's only acting after all . . .'"

"What about the storm scene in *Lear*?"

"Who said Shakespeare?" A young man with a very red face whom David knew as Jack Humphries of the *Globe* joined them. "It's not done, Hepburn. Don't let him get you into bad ways, Mr. Winter."

"I was just going to say, when you interrupted me, Jack, that if Winter had seen Madison in the last act of *Ghosts*, he'd not complain that insanity defeated acting on the stage."

"Oh, Hepburn's not sane himself on the subject of Madison," said the young man instructing David.

"He'll devote the whole of his notice of to-night's play to the way the footman carried in the attaché case or poured out the claret. We all know that. I, on the other hand, mean to give my notice to Mary Archer. Isn't that girl a peach?"

David stared. Before he could decide whether to tell this cheerful partisan that a peach was the last thing he should think of as a simile for Mary Archer's white face, dark eyes and tall slimness, the trill of an electric bell announcing that the curtain was about to rise on Act II, broke up the groups around the bar and there was a general movement towards the auditorium.

On the way to the staircase David stopped to speak to Godfrey Bates's lovely American wife.

"Why, Mr. Winter," she said in her soft Southern voice, "I can't tell you what a relief it is that, though the secretary in this play is in love with her employer, there's been no scene of bright efficiency and sentimental misunderstanding."

"She was quite an efficient murderer," said David.

"Yes: but that's hardly a secretarial job."

"I think it was included in *her* idea of service,"

said David over his shoulder as they parted in the dividing stream of people going down to the stalls.

"Of course," a well-informed woman on the staircase was explaining to her friend, "Vera'd *never* have taken this part for the run of the piece. She's doing it purely as a gesture to Tom Renishaw — to give it a chance of catching on. He's just finished a play for her. Such a part — the whole play, in fact! They're going into rehearsal with it next week — and then, if this play doesn't come off in a fortnight, Sybil Cavendish is taking Marta."

"Hullo, Betterton!" The critic of an evening paper which never gave more than two inches of space to any play not produced by Mr. Cochran, called to the colleague who had three whole columns of the *Sunday Post* at his disposal. "Are you going to the revival of *Pericles* at the St. Stephen's to-morrow?"

"*Pericles*?" said the happy golfer with a pleasant laugh. "Never heard of it. Who's it by?"

"I like this play," said a young girl to her com-

panion, as they stood for a moment, waiting for the jam in the doorway to give them passage-way to their places. "It's about something."

"And what," asked the amused voice of the man beside her, "do you think this play is about? Murder?"

"No, that's only the excuse. It's about values and the way they change."

"I hadn't noticed that, Rosie. You are taking it all very seriously."

"Isn't that the way to take it?"

"I'd forgotten how young you were," said the man.

Dacres and the little critic were in their places when David regained his seat. They were discussing the cultivation of sweet-peas in their gardens at Wimbledon.

It was some minutes before the curtain rose. The audience was still pouring into the stalls when the house lights went down and the power behind the curtain was giving them a little rope. There had been an unusually sharp recrudescence of plain-speaking letters to the Press about the manners of first-night audiences. It was not taking much effect.

David was glad that his neighbours did not

attempt to discuss the play with him: glad that he could sit quietly for a few minutes before the Third Act began. He wished he had followed his own decision at the beginning of the evening and had stayed in his place throughout the long interval. But when the curtain fell he had felt thirsty; he had also felt it might be rude to ignore O'Hara's invitation to join him, so he had gone up. And O'Hara had not even spoken to him, had, so David could not help supposing, deliberately avoided catching his eye when he joined the group the critic was haranguing.

A gifted, capricious creature, O'Hara! David had heard of this habit of blowing hot and cold on acquaintances so that no-one could ever call him friend for long, and of pronouncing judgments that conflicted with one another in his two notices, one for the *Evening Sentinel*: this was usually adverse: the second for the *Saturday Illustrated Post*, a new and successful weekly which was devoting more space to the theatre than any of its contemporaries.

David was not disposed to charge O'Hara with inconsistency because he had the courage to revise his verdicts. It was difficult enough to form an opinion on a play, seen for the first time, that would not cry to be revised or restated when once

you saw your own words in print. You could go back, re-read, check, verify when reviewing a book: but a play acted itself without repeating any passage, noteworthy or obscure, and while it told its tale, demanded attention on three counts. Its appeal was too complicated. You were bound to miss some point, while under the impression made by another, in a scene which you had to see, to watch and to hear in one and the same unrelenting minute. You had to pass judgment on playwright, players, scenic artist and producer at one sitting, while their combined work was set in movement before your eyes and made its continuous appeal to your ears as well. It was too much to ask any one man to judge all this by himself. A dramatic critic ought to see a play at least twice before making up his mind about it. The lay public was more fortunate. He himself had never been content with one hearing of any play that interested him. Did not a play's run depend on the people who went to see it again and again just because they were intelligent enough to know that it could not be perfectly seen and heard at one performance only?

To-night's play—before it was ended—had offered O'Hara ample material for comparison with the work of several great predecessors.

O'Hara knew the dramatic literature of the past fifty years well enough to be able to confine himself to this one aspect of criticism only, and to base his report on this knowledge. Hepburn, who wrote at leisure for a weekly paper, was often a fortnight behind the current production, and had sometimes advised his readers to go and see some particularly distinguished piece of playwriting or acting after the piece had been taken off. He evidently had a great deal to say, and to write later, about Beany's work and Madison's performance from a technical standpoint.

But that was only one man's impression. There were the others. Hepburn was more interested in production than in drama; in acting as the art of an individual player than in the merits of the play itself. The red-faced young man could see, and would probably write about, no-one but Mary Archer.

Dacres, apparently so eaten up with his own prejudices that he would like no play in which certain actors appeared, had grown sour with the boredom of thirty years of first-nights and ought to be put out of his pain. He would undoubtedly sneer at the whole thing because Nicholas Madison was playing in it and because it was a serious work. It was recognised by his fellow critics that poor

old Dacres would only praise the lightest and most obvious of sentimental comedies and had grown incapable of understanding that the actresses he had admired as a boy could no longer be cast for juvenile leads.

The little man, who was now explaining how he preferred budding to layering his roses, thought of a new play in terms of its box-office possibilities. He was alert to notice the signs of a popular success and to listen to what the audience said: and this also was part of criticism.

The audience, so far as David had been able to disentangle any opinion of the play from the chatter around him, had concerned itself partly with the clothes worn by the women on the stage and partly with speculations about the plot. The girl on the stairs had seemed to have some idea that a play might convey some discussion of life, or be, indirectly perhaps, a criticism of conduct, but he had thought her remark rather wilfully serious — almost silly. And yet the callow little thing had the right attitude. She represented a not inconsiderable part of the audience which, as one conglomerate and rather monstrous unity, was in the process of making Renishaw's drama a success or a failure.

The audience, not the actors, were ultimately responsible for the life or death of a play. He,

David Winter, and the two women who were now discussing the dress Lisa Thelusson had worn; the people on the staircase; the burly young critic who couldn't see the play for the actress; they all had already this evening been hushed and fused into one and the same receptive entity. If, during the Act that was still to come, that fusion, that hush were to repeat itself and become deeper, were to hold and continue for ten consecutive minutes, it would give back its bewitchment to the players, increasing their power to bind spells, so that the players and the played-upon in collaboration would reach out beyond illusion and become once more, for an ecstatic moment, protagonists and chorus in the antique ritual that had for its aim the celebration of a mystery and the release, in prayer, of the human spirit from its bondage. It was for this David was waiting.

How many of the people who were now chattering so lightheartedly until the curtain should rise for the last time that evening, knew that their expectation of a climax to come held them by virtue of prenatal memories; of inherited fear; of an antique, unforgotten need to find in the simulacrum of an expiation an assurance that their own stifled but not obliterated sense of original sin had found its scapegoat and its unmerited but

efficacious pardon? Did not all plays, worth a thought, present Everyman in some fable of his downfall or salvation?

The fable on which Renishaw had built so far was crude enough, and David was not convinced that, in designing to show a murder actually on the stage, the playwright had justified his aim. In the first origins of tragedy, the victim was slain before the eyes of the multitude; the blood sacrifice was the spectacle; its consummation produced the immediate catharsis. Visible death brought home to the living the sense of their own individual guilt; their collective, inescapable mortality, and, seeing its Nemesis, they were purged from their fear. But now, when what was first a ritual had, because of atheism, thinned away into an amusement; when religion had yielded its most spectacular secret to art, and art had shackled itself with commercialism, it was no longer possible to think of a play in such terms. To-day we have forgotten that all the world's great tragedies are based on violent death: that they all handle the consequence of blood-guiltiness. The priest, the slayer, has degenerated into the criminal. Clytaemnestra and Macbeth are now the dummies of detective drama. The avenger has become an automaton, and blood-

shed an innocuous trick of the playwright's repertory.

David gave his shoulders a hasty shake. He was taking this business too seriously. Arbuthnot would laugh at him for thus re-entering the chrysalis shell of his undergraduate solemnity. Arbuthnot, who was the greatest living critic, would not, high as he rated to-night's author, drag in Mithras and Aeschylus in order to judge the rather crammed and arbitrary construction of the problem that was about to be solved. Arbuthnot and O'Hara and Hepburn—all men who lived for, and by, the theatre, men in whose hands criticism still had weight and dignity, would treat this play with consideration. The lesser men, some of them little more than reporters, sent out by their News Editors with instructions to deliver something under five hundred words before ten minutes past eleven, and to lead off with the names of the more fashionable people in the audience, would remark that the author had distinguished himself as an airman and that Mary Archer's mother had married a title. They were all of them better fitted to write of this play than he was, who had lost his way, listening to fragments of incompleted opinion, and clutching at undigested theories in a vain

attempt to recover a critical standard he had not so much lost as never clearly found.

He looked at his watch. It was a quarter-past ten. Someone had told him that the play was a long one. He had heard two of the reporter-critics agreeing to share a taxi to Fleet Street at five minutes to eleven. Thank goodness he need not send in his copy till midnight!



## THE THIRD ACT

THE first thing David noticed when the curtain rose on *A Room in Professor Nuneham's Flat in Mount Street, six weeks later*, was that almost the whole of the back of the set was occupied by a window consisting of three double casements above a wide sill, on which one or two small Egyptian bronzes stood silhouetted against a grey, featureless sky. Either the flat was on the top floor, or a thick white fog was obliterating any view of houses or trees outside. A large double writing-table stood down-stage immediately below the window. It was covered with papers and writing-materials. There was a telephone at one end of the table. The room had two doors, one on each side of the stage. Hepburn would see this and be satisfied that Beany was about to show them his ballet-master's skill, or Renishaw's dexterity, in distributing the movement of his scene. Then David noticed that the arrangement described with so much particularity in the stage directions for the last Act of *The Madras House* had been used for this set also. The fourth wall held the fireplace. Its position was

marked by a large club fender, cut low in the centre, with two padded seats on either side: fire-irons were propped against it, a coal-scuttle stood to the left and a Persian rug lay between it and a couple of deep leather-covered easy-chairs; these, with a small table on the prompt side by the wall, a filing cabinet by the opposite door, and one or two straight-backed chairs, completed the furniture of the room. A couple of large-scale maps hung in frames on the walls. The whole effect was rather stark and business-like. It was a place for a man to work in. David had plenty of time to take in these details and to notice that the invisible fire must be burning well, since it spread a fan-shaped glow over the scene and sent fitful shadows wavering across the floor and walls. A stout respectable elderly woman, who wore an apron, but no cap, moved to and fro in the room setting it in order.

She was by the window, looking out into the fog, when the curtain rose, and her short exclamation, half shiver, half grunt, as she turned away, expressed her feelings about the weather. It was greeted by an appreciative chuckle and a round of applause from the audience, recognising the ample contours and flat spoon-billed face of Miss Nellie Ragg, who could draw a leading lady's salary for

appearing with a duster and speaking half a dozen lines in any production.

Miss Ragg received her small ovation with a genteel cough which, while keeping her within the bounds of the character she was playing, could be, and actually was, taken as an acknowledgment of her public's favour. David, who had not seen her play before, was struck at once by something more than competent in the way she gave to the commonplace action of a superior domestic servant engaged in the most ordinary of duties, a significance that seemed intended to point the action to come as well as to establish her own characterisation.

In the first couple of seconds she had made it clear that the day was foggy; the air indoors irritating to the throat. Her next action was to come down to the table, run her finger along the cross-bar of the telephone instrument; examine it with an air of having expected to find it dusty and to be almost pleased that her suspicion was justified, and then to begin to dust it carefully herself, thereby conveying the fact that some underling had not done well in her eyes. The audience simmered with pleasure, as she straightened the blotter on the table and cast a meaning glance at the large attaché-case placed beside it.

"The telephone," thought David, "will certainly be used before long. We now know that it is there and may expect to hear it ring at some turning-point in the action. We also know that Mrs. Emmer is of a critical and observant nature. She has ascertained that the water in the Rouen jug holding the bunch of chrysanthemums has not been changed this morning and is going to remedy this culpable oversight. She would certainly tell us that she 'likes things just so,' if questioned about her views on housekeeping."

Mrs. Emmer carried the offending receptacle out by the door on the prompt side and could be heard calling to a maid to throw these flowers away. Then she came back; straightened the folds of the window curtains; went over to the door on the left of the stage and set it open. While she was doing this a bell was heard to ring and there was the sound of someone being admitted at the hall door of the flat.

A moment later Mrs. Rawlinson was shown into the room by a maid who did not enter the stage. She was wearing a tweed hat, a heavy coat and a pair of leather gloves, and carried a dozen long-stemmed, red roses from which any paper that might have wrapped them for their passage through

the foggy day outside had been torn away.

"Oh, Mrs. Emmer," she said. "Has Mr. Nuneham had breakfast?"

"Yes, Mrs. Rawlinson, and gone out this ten minutes."

Mrs. Emmer spoke laying emphasis on Mrs. Rawlinson's name as one whose station was definitely above the line at which the terms "sir" and "madam" were used in conversation with an employer or with that employer's visitors.

"How tiresome!" Madge Rawlinson laid the roses on a corner of the writing-table. "I thought I'd be sure to catch him at this early hour. It can't be half-past ten yet. Is Miss Pearce here?"

"Not unless she's come in and gone across to the typing-room without telling me," said Mrs. Emmer, crossing to the small door on the O.P. side, which she had set open, and looking in:

"No, she's not there," she announced, coming back to the table. "She doesn't get here much before the half-hour as a rule. But I *did* hear her say she'd meet Mr. Nuneham at the B.M. — wherever that may be — and have his books out by ten-thirty."

"If they're at the British Museum I might as well leave my message with you, Mrs. Emmer. I've brought these roses. They came this morning

from Surrey. My husband and I are going to Sunningdale for the week-end and we wondered if Mr. Nuneham would join us. I'm driving down this morning and Major Rawlinson is following on the four-thirty train. We shall be coming back on Monday."

"You are not going to your country seat then, I take it, Mrs. Rawlinson."

Mrs. Rawlinson shook her head and forbore to check Mrs. Emmer's grandiloquence.

"I should not suggest Mr. Nuneham joining us there."

"No, Mrs. Rawlinson, I quite see your point. But Mr. Nuneham isn't making a good recovery from the shock. Better, I grant you, and for the past week he's been trying to work. He and Miss Pearce they've been pasting up sheets of torn paper—looks as if a dog had savaged it all to bits. Nasty messy work with paste. They don't seem to be very cheerful over it, if you take my meaning, Mrs. Rawlinson, but it's a good sign that he's at work, as I'm sure you'll agree."

"I'm so glad. You'll give him my message and, if he'll ring through to Major Rawlinson before half-past three . . ."

"If you'll pardon me, Mrs. Rawlinson, I'll give your message to Mr. Nuneham, but it will be all

in vain in a manner of speaking."

"Has he another engagement?"

"Not so far as I am aware of. It's in the spirit, if you take my meaning, that Mr. Nuneham will be unwilling, not in the flesh."

"I thought you said he was quite normal and cheerful."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Rawlinson, such a thing was far from my meaning — very far indeed. Cheerful is not what he can be called, and normal he has never been."

Madge Rawlinson sat down rather suddenly on the arm of the chair by which she had been standing.

"Oh," she said weakly, trying not to laugh and at the same time interested in the housekeeper's disclosures.

"The ways of Providence," remarked Mrs. Emmer, "are strange, Mrs. Rawlinson, but sometimes they are far more sensible than at others. I'm not one to hold with violence as a general rule, if you take my meaning, but there's no doubt but that some people are well out of the way, whatever the means."

Madge Rawlinson uttered a little sound between a laugh and a sigh. It was taken for encouragement.

"There are those, Mrs. Rawlinson, who waste the best years of their lives, in a manner of speaking, waiting for Nature to take its course, which seldom happens." Mrs. Emmer had started on the flood and there was no stemming it. "Whereas we have all reason to be thankful when the right person is taken, however it may seem to outsiders."

"Surely, Mrs. Emmer, you cannot want to justify . . ."

"Yes — *and* no, Mrs. Rawlinson. Circumstances alter cases."

"No circumstances . . ." began Madge Rawlinson: but Mrs. Emmer would not listen to platitudes from another.

"Naming no names, Mrs. Rawlinson," she pronounced with finality, "some people are better dead."

"The living often regret — especially . . ."

"The living have their lives and plenty to fill them with, if you ask me, Mrs. Rawlinson. And it's the police who have to keep up their own credit: which for the moment is far from being the case."

Mrs. Rawlinson rose and began to pull on her gloves.

"We shall all be relieved — and happier too, I daresay — when this wretched business is really

over and we can forget it," she said. "I know Mr. Nuneham wants to do so — even if the criminal should go scot-free."

"Whatever people may think in a weak moment, Mrs. Rawlinson, it's not in Nature that their better self wouldn't think differently later on. As things are, if you follow me, it's like between the funeral and getting home and having the will read. We can't settle down."

"Mrs. Emmer," said Madge Rawlinson, "I'm sure it will not be wrong if I tell you that Major Rawlinson was telephoned for to go to Scotland Yard half an hour ago. The police have arrested a man in connection with the jewel robbery and they may be clearing up the whole business at this moment."

"I'm sure I hope they are for everybody's sake. Miss Pearce is wearing herself to a shadow over it. She comes in every morning thinner than what she was yesterday, if you know what I mean, Mrs. Rawlinson."

At this moment, in proof of the justness of Mrs. Emmer's description of her appearance, Verity came in from the hall, still wearing her outdoor clothes, and carrying a dispatch-case and some books in a strap.

Once more the actress brought with her on to the stage a sense of retrospective construction, so that the mind went back to her last exit. David remembered the flitting wraith in a white dressing-gown, slipping away from the darkened room when she had learnt that her crime had not released a man from what she had believed to be an intolerable bondage. He recalled the half-drugged bewilderment in which she had listened to Conrad Nuneham's monologue and had heard it carry him back into the years before she knew him; into the years when he had been happy. She had learnt that her deed had restored to him the glamour and romance which had once made his bondage seem an accepted contentment. Mary Archer showed him this same girl six weeks later, awake now with a mind, unclouded by drugs and amazement, but haunted by a definite and growing anxiety.

All the actress did was to come on to the stage (but she came into a warm familiar room out of the acrid clamminess of a November morning); to lay the books she carried down on the writing-table (but she was performing a duty and a service in which she found joy); to utter a conventional greeting (but it was a well-known and beloved friend to whom she spoke).

It was partly, of course, an intonation of

singular exactness; a precision of timing and gesture that made the distinction and significance of Mary Archer's work. Also she had a way, almost a trick, of raising the delicate eyebrows, that gave character and individuality to her face. But these things in themselves were not enough to account for the complete statement of unspoken events which her coming conveyed. Was there, David wondered, some part of the histrionic gift which enabled those who possessed it to establish a telepathic communication between the characters they assumed, whose state they admittedly raised above its normal eloquence and emotion, and the audience who listened and watched and were thus made aware of more than they actually heard or saw?

Before he could do more than formulate the question, Madge Rawlinson had begun to speak and his attention once more ceased to be speculative.

"Verity, my dear, I'm so glad I caught you. Is Conrad coming?"

"Presently. He went up to the Egyptian Galleries at the Museum to see someone while I went to the London Library for these."

Verity took up the parcel of books she had laid

down and carried them across the stage, going out by the small door on the O.P. side.

While she was off the stage, Madge Rawlinson talked to her.

"I can't wait for him," she said, "I've got to do some shopping in Knightsbridge before I go off to Sunningdale — out of this abominable fog, I hope. George has gone down to Scotland Yard. We want Conrad to come down for the week-end and play golf. Do you think he will?"

"I don't know," said Verity, coming back into the room without her hat and coat. "He said something about working to-morrow."

"Try to persuade him. Say you want the week-end off yourself. You look as if a day in bed would do you no harm."

Verity took no notice of this suggestion.

"Scotland Yard?" she asked, almost with relief.

"You did not know they had taken over the . . . the . . . . Marta's death? Didn't Conrad tell you?"

"We don't talk about it. Not in that way."

"Very sensible! I'm half sorry that, after all these weeks, they seem to have found something, or someone. We had hoped that Conrad might forget."

"He doesn't forget."

"No, I suppose he won't, so long as the mystery isn't cleared up."

"It's keeping it alive," said Verity.

"Verity." The elder woman took the girl's hands in her own. "This is all a great strain for you."

"Don't, Madge." Verity disengaged herself.

"My dear, does he know you are in love with him?"

"He did — once."

"And he?"

"I don't know — now."

"Did he ever make love to you?"

"He knew and I knew — but that was all."

"Before Marta was killed?"

"Yes."

"You know," said Mrs. Rawlinson with decision, "you ought to go away for a time."

"Not yet. I can't go yet. I must stay till I have to go."

"It's very selfish of Conrad to keep you here."

"He doesn't know. He is trying to work. I can't leave him yet."

"Have you pieced together all that torn manuscript?"

"We have nearly finished it. I am typing it out and then I think he will destroy it."

"It was one of the most horrible things about the whole business. That case full of torn paper — covered with her finger-prints. I've never liked to ask Conrad about it. Did he know she had done it?"

"Not till after — when it was found."

"What a devilish thing to do! It almost justified the man in killing her . . . only . . . of course . . ."

She broke off as Mrs. Emmer came in carrying a vase in which she had put the roses Mrs. Rawlinson had brought.

"Such a nice touch of colour, I always think, especially on a foggy day," said the housekeeper, as she sat the flowers down on the writing-table. "And the heat of the room will bring out their perfume, in a manner of speaking. There's Mr. Nuneham's latch-key."

Mrs. Emmer hurried out into the hall, where she could be heard commiserating with her employer and announcing that he had a visitor.

"Don't say anything to Conrad, Madge," Verity entreated.

"About those papers? My dear child!" Mrs. Rawlinson protested.

"No — about me — about going away."

Mrs. Rawlinson gave a penetrating look at the girl, who met it with a trembling insistence.

"Five years ago, you'd have said, 'I'll kill you if you do!' " she said, and then, as Verity gave a sharp twist away from her: "Oh — my dear — it was a clumsy thing to say. I was only teasing you."

Conrad's first glance on entering was for Verity.

"Hullo, Madge," he said: but, as he was shaking hands with Mrs. Rawlinson, he spoke to the girl.

"Got through the fog all right?"

"Yes," said Verity. "It wasn't nearly so thick south of Piccadilly."

"That's good news," said Madge Rawlinson. "I may drive out of it. Conrad, George wants you to go with him this afternoon to Sunningdale for some golf. I'm on my way there now."

"I can't," said Conrad. "That man is coming to photograph some things for the plates of my book to-morrow. I thought George was bringing his bronzes to be done with mine."

"I'm so glad you reminded me, Conrad. George has sent Francis to meet the butler at Victoria. He is coming up to town for a few days' holiday and is bringing them with him. Francis is to take the parcel from Bond and bring it straight here."

"Francis?"

"Our queer footman. He's up with us, valeting

George. We couldn't very well leave him down in the country at present."

"Of course!" said Conrad, absently. "He's coming here?"

"Only to the door, Conrad. To leave the parcel. He won't come in." It was Verity who spoke, anxiously, reassuring herself as well as Conrad.

"I'm afraid," said Madge, "that George told him to wait till he got here. He's gone to Scotland Yard."

There was a pause.

Conrad made an inarticulate sound of enquiry.

"They have some fresh evidence." Madge hesitated. "About the jewel robberies, I think. George will tell you when he gets here."

"I see," said Conrad.

They had all three been keeping away from the subject that was still uppermost in all their minds. Each player conveyed that sense of the unspoken thing, that tacit avoidance of an imminent pitfall, only possible among people who have an intimate knowledge of and affection for one another, which for a moment, when she was trying to persuade Verity to take a holiday, Madge Rawlinson had forgotten.

The dialogue went too quickly for David to

observe the method used by any one of the three players to indicate their mutual apprehension of one another's reserves. But thought is quick and travels on more levels than one. Even as he asked himself whether it were the audience, who by their knowledge, both of the situation presented on the stage and of the conduct such a situation in real life would impose on them, had assumed this delicacy in the characters who were doing no more than speak their lines well, he was conscious of another enlightenment.

He had heard fretful and dissatisfied authors complain that actors mangled and betrayed the parts written for them. Only once, and this from a man whom David himself considered to be the greatest writer of his generation, had he heard another comment.

"I sit at rehearsals," the playwright novice had said, "and can hardly believe that the speeches I have written can really be as witty and profound and moving as these people make them."

That was a great artist, at his first experience in the theatre, recognising the artistry of others who knew more about the business of bringing written words to life than he did. How much, David wondered, had Renishaw felt his players were adding, or had, in rehearsal, added to his inten-

tions? How much had he, out of his experience, taught them about their parts. He was, of this David felt certain, altogether too wise and generous a man to attribute the failure any play of his might endure entirely to the players, as smaller and less competent authors usually did. And this play was not a failure so far.

Madge Rawlinson appeared to be one of those false starters who announce their departure half an hour before they accomplish it: but she had gone at last. Conrad, accompanying her to the door of the flat, left Verity alone on the stage. She came down to the fireplace and knelt before it to place fresh coal on the fire. The position lit her face and the supple lines of her crouching figure; but it was a difficult one and, though Mary Archer still continued to be in her part, either she had not the experience to carry this moment off, or the producer had been at fault in supposing that anyone could hold the scene from such a place and with such business. Whatever the cause, the gallery grew restive.

Some people began to talk and were hissed down by the more serious-minded. But the spell had been broken and for a moment the whole play trembled on that verge from which, one false step

more, and there is no recovery.

David held his breath.

In another second, possibly half a second before his cue, Lewis Keane was back on the stage. Whether the actor realised the situation and invented a line in order to save it, David could not be sure. It was more than possible that his very presence on the stage was enough to steady a gallery by whom he was recognised as the reigning star.

But, as Conrad said "That's right, Verity. Make up a good fire," David felt that the words were not quite in character at this point in the play.

No one else, however, seemed to find anything amiss with the line, and, their confidence restored, the audience settled down again.

Still crouching over the fire, its light now dimmed by the coals she had heaped on it, Verity shivered and spoke without turning her head in Conrad's direction.

"It's cold," she said, "and dark." But the darkness was not in the room, lit by the fire and by the daylight outside the windows.

He came down to the hearth and stood behind her.

"Verity," he spoke very gently. "You heard what Madge said just now."

She looked up at him and then rose to her feet, backing away from him with a curious half-terrified look, her hands outstretched behind her as if she were hiding something, not from herself but from him.

"About — about the jewels," she whispered.

"If it were only that, they would not have sent for George."

She understood him: but she would not admit it yet.

"If it had been — anything else — they'd have sent for you."

"We must wait. It may be soon now."

"Conrad! I thought you did not *want* to know."

He made a step nearer; but he did not touch her.

"I want more than anything in the world to know — now."

"Oh!"

It was a cry, so soft, so desperate, that it seemed he must have heard the confession of which it was the breath. But there was another cry, the cry of his own heart, too loud in his ears for him to heed her.

"Come and sit down for a moment," he said.

"George will be here — with news — and we can't settle down to work till he has gone."

"When he has gone — then it may be too late for work."

"It is strange that the end may, perhaps, be so near, just as we have finished mending those torn sheets, Verity."

He seated himself on one of the chairs by the fire but she stood looking away from him.

"I can listen better if I stand," she said.

He leaned forward, looking up at her.

"It's like this," he said. "At first I did not want to know. I did not want them to catch and hang the man who did it — after the first, when I nearly killed the man I found there. When I realised what I'd done — and how nearly I had come to being a murderer myself — I saw how little right we have to take vengeance — for *anything* — seeing how near we all are to the verge of crime ourselves. So, when the police couldn't bring it home to anyone, I thought I was willing that whoever had done it should escape. Then, next day, when I looked at the manuscript all torn and ruined — and the fingerprints showed that she had done it — it was a symbol of what she was doing to my life. It seemed as though this dreadful thing were in a sense a deliverance and that I had no right to wish to

destroy the agent through whom it had come."

"Oh!" said Verity. "You forgave it?"

"It wasn't forgiving — it was sharing. And then it all died down and was not my responsibility. After, when Dobson told George that he had to hand the investigation over to Scotland Yard — and they did not worry us — when you and I, Verity, were able to recover what she had destroyed, I began to be almost happy."

"I know," said Verity, "but it did not last."

"I'll tell you why — now. I can tell you now that it seems to be coming to an end. I began to see that vengeance is more than the first impulse of anger, or pain, or sudden loss. It is as much a part of our duty to one another as kindness or compassion. Just as you must succour the wounded or see that those of your household are fed and sheltered, so you must avenge anyone whose life has been taken with violence — anyone whose life has been in your care. I thought I could begin my life again, take up what she had broken and mend it and go on. But it didn't work out like that. She is dead: but the manner of her death stands in the way. It is a kind of debt that must be paid. The instinct of mankind, demanding a life for a life, is stronger than reason; more reasonable than pity or forbearance. I want my life to go on, Verity —

I want it to go on — and with yours — but this stands in the way."

"Conrad — if you knew — if they caught and — hanged the murderer — would the way be clear?"

"I think so. I think Marta would be really dead and quiet then. It is as if her life that was taken from her had passed into the life of her murderer. So long as he lives — she lives too — *not* free, bound in the living of that other. As though she now suffered the pain of death but could not reach its peace. They say a murderer is haunted by the ghost of his victim. That is why we must kill him too, so that they may both be free — and we also."

"So that we also may be free," she echoed.

"Yes," he said, and the word was like a sigh.

"Conrad! Do you want to be free that way?"

"It is the only way, Verity."

In the pause that followed, the front door-bell began to ring — once — twice and again with a more prolonged trilling. It rang as a friend rings it at a door when he is impatient; at a door where he is accustomed to enter.

There was a moment of suspense. Conrad looked across at the door to the hall, not ready yet for the interruption to his self-revealing, self-

exploring mood. Verity did not turn her head: but her eyes were restless and the raising of her delicate brows was at once desperate and resigned.

David wondered why this interruption to an argument which had seemed to be leading to a revelation heightened instead of breaking the tension the scene had produced. Expectancy of this fresh arrival increased the sense of crisis. In a novel the discussion between Conrad and Verity would have continued to the accompaniment of some analysis of their emotional state. On the stage the actors themselves provided that analysis in collaboration with the audience, who had been made previously aware of the differing significance every spoken line had for each of the speakers. The counterpoint of that duet needed no annotation: the entrance of a third voice was about to enrich the fugue, two themes of which the participants now re-stated in the wordless rhythm of their waiting.

Mrs. Emmer's genteel accents as she admitted the newcomer quickened the tempo and a masculine voice exchanging greetings with her modulated the passage. It passed into another key: but not for a moment did the playing cease to fill the house, as the bars of a transitional passage keep their hold

on a theme when music discusses and changes and returns to it again.

Major Rawlinson was shown into the room.

"I think," he said, when perfunctory greetings had been exchanged, "I had better speak to you by yourself, Conrad."

Verity was eager to be away from them.

"There's only one more page to be typed. Shall I do it now?" she said.

"Thank you, Verity. If you will."

She took up her dispatch-case and some papers and went into the inner room, closing the door behind her.

Major Rawlinson lit a cigarette and waited until the clashing of keys could be heard faintly from the other room, before he spoke again.

"I've come from Scotland Yard," he said.

"Madge has been here — she told me. Anything fresh?"

"They've caught the jewel thief."

"Did they need to send for you to tell you that?"

"Yes. The man has made a confession. It includes all that happened the night Marta was killed."

Conrad drew a deep breath and closed his eyes before answering:

"I knew it was coming," he said at last.

"It's a fellow called Weaver; the police have been on his track for some time. According to his statement he attempted to get into my house but failed. He says he did not kill Marta — but that he saw it done."

"By whom?"

"By Francis."

"Your footman?"

"Yes. You remember, Conrad, I told you after the inquest that I had been doubly anxious, knowing that the man was out on licence — on my responsibility. He had been in prison for stealing jewels."

"One of the same gang?"

"No. He wasn't a burglar — only a thief. He was a jeweller's assistant in a shop in Grafton Street. Weaver says he'd got into touch with him — they do — they know each other's records, these professionals. He was coming, by arrangement, to take anything Francis could lay his hands on. Then he saw Francis kill Marta, and fled at once. Your burglar will not get mixed up in a murder if he can possibly help it."

"Then my first impulse was right!" cried the other.

"I'm not yet convinced. Nor are the police. A

man charged with one crime will often obtain, if not exactly his liberty, a certain mitigation of his penalty, if he can help the police towards the solution of another. There is no second witness. Weaver worked on his own. There seems to be no doubt that he was there that night. They got a footprint, you remember. On the other hand, Francis had an almost complete alibi—and no motive, unless he'd been frightened suddenly. I've watched him pretty closely these past weeks. He hasn't behaved like a man with such a crime on his mind. He's been cheerful and has picked up his duties amazingly well."

"Where is he now?"

"He should be on his way here from Victoria. I sent him down to meet Bond with that case of funerary bronzes you asked me for."

"I had forgotten. They are to be photographed." Conrad had lost his grip on all but one idea.

"I don't yet believe Francis did it: but they are getting out a warrant for his arrest. I'd rather for your sake that they did not take him here—and I want to see him first, in any case."

"You think he may confess."

"It's not that. That night, while Dobson was taking everybody's statements, Francis told me

something. I promised him I'd bear it in mind if ever he were charged."

"Well?"

"Conrad — you remember, I gave you one of Grainger's Tarot cards?"

Conrad shook his head.

"No," he said.

"Think, man! It was after everyone had gone to bed. I came down to the library and gave it to you. At least, I showed it to you and left it for you to keep."

Conrad knitted his brows.

"I do remember vaguely," he said. "But I don't know what I did with it. Why do you ask me for it now?"

"God forgive me, Conrad. I thought, at the time, that it might — that you might have dropped it. It was found by the body. I left it for you to give back to Grainger — or . . . well . . ."

"You could have kept it yourself. Why do you want it now?"

"Francis gave it to me. It was he who found it. He thought it might be a clue — to the real murderer. You had accused him — and when you came and withdrew your accusation he let me take it. Now he will ask me to produce it in support of his own story. It may mean life or death to him."

"I don't yet see what you were driving at. And I've not the faintest idea what became of the card."

"You didn't destroy it?"

"I? No. Why should I?"

"Exactly! I was a fool. In the confusion and anxieties of that night I thought I was doing the wisest thing. You are sure you did not take it from the library?"

"I may have done. I was wearing my dressing-gown."

"Could you possibly have left it in one of the pockets?"

Conrad went to the door leading to the hall and, opening it, called:

"Mrs. Emmer! Would you bring my grey dressing-gown here for a moment?"

He came back, leaving the door open behind him.

"I wonder," he said, "if Verity saw it."

"Verity?"

"She came down after you had gone. She was half drugged — so was I. Madge's sedatives weren't quite strong enough."

"I see. You said nothing about it."

"She was only with me for a few minutes. I fell asleep before she went. In the morning I wasn't

quite sure I hadn't dreamed that she'd been there."

Mrs. Emmer came into the room carrying the dressing-gown over her arm.

"Is this the one you required, Mr. Nuneham," she asked, "or did you wish for the bath-robe?"

"That's the one, thank you." He took it from her, and then, as she lingered: "You needn't wait. I'll put it back myself."

Mrs. Emmer made her way with deliberate elegance to the door: then, curiosity getting the upper hand, she paused and enquired:

"Shall you be requiring your bedroom slippers?"

"No! No!" It was Major Rawlinson who spoke with the impatience of a man who is almost at the end of his nervous control.

The two men held the dressing-gown between them and turned out its pockets. A cigarette-case and a handkerchief were the only things they found.

In the silence, as they searched, the sound of the typewriter seemed to increase and grow faster; suddenly it stopped.

"We shall have to ask Verity," said Major Rawlinson, throwing the dressing-gown on the back of the wide chair by the fireplace.

"I don't suppose she'll remember. I am only half sure she was there."

"That's all right, Conrad. We'll have to explain, of course, why we ask her about it."

Conrad crossed to the door of the typing-room and opened it.

"Verity," he said.

She came into the room carrying several sheets of typed paper.

"It's finished now," she said with a look that was almost a smile.

Conrad took the papers from her and laid them on the table.

"George wants to ask you about something," he said.

Verity turned to Major Rawlinson with a listless air. Nothing that anyone else had to say was of any moment now.

"It's just this," he began with a little hesitation. "We haven't bothered you much over what happened the night Marta was killed. You were out of it, and there was not much need to question you: but Conrad tells me that you saw him in the library later that night."

"Yes," said Verity.

"Well — it doesn't really much matter, and you'll not be asked about it by anyone else. But we want

you to tell us one thing. To-day the police have fresh evidence. It seems to point to my footman, Francis."

"He didn't do it." She was roused and certain now.

"I think with you. But an important piece in his defence is missing and we wonder if you can help us to trace it."

"If I can . . .?"

"You remember that, before dinner that night, Cyril Grainger was showing us his Tarot cards."

"Yes."

"One of them was missing when he came to put them away."

"I tore it up," said Verity.

"You . . .?"

"It was on the table—when Conrad had gone to sleep. It was the card I had drawn."

"But why . . .?"

"It had warned me," she said.

Major Rawlinson made a gesture of impatience.

"I disliked that fortune-telling all the time. Grainger is really very tiresome with his occultism."

Conrad said nothing: he was watching the girl with a puzzled expression.

"Look here, Verity, there's not so much harm

done after all, if you are sure it was that card you tore up. Can you remember where you found it — and what you did with the bits?"

"It was on the table. The Ace of Wands. I tore it in pieces and threw them in the fire."

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell the police that."

"Yes," said Verity. Even now she did not remember that she had taken the card with her when she had slipped away from the library to go up, as Marta had bidden her, at a quarter to eight.

At that moment the telephone bell began to ring. Automatically fulfilling part of her daily routine, Verity went to the table and took up the receiver.

"Yes," she said in a clear, matter-of-fact voice. "Mr. Nuneham's secretary speaking."

She listened to someone at the other end of the line, said "Hold on," and, lowering the receiver, turned to Major Rawlinson.

"It's your footman," she said, "speaking from Victoria. He says he has not got the parcel yet. The fog has held up the trains. He thought you might be wondering why he had not come up here."

"I'll speak to him," said Major Rawlinson, crossing to the table and taking the receiver from her.

"That you, Francis? Yes. Yes. An hour late. I

dare say. No. Don't wait. Bond will know what to do with it. — Yes. — Go back to Netherhall Mansions and wait for me. — No. I shan't be going down to Sunningdale. No. I'll lunch at the club. Don't go out. If anyone calls, say you are expecting me."

He hung up the receiver.

"That's just as well," he said. "I'd rather they took him from my place."

"Were they coming here?" asked Conrad.

"No. No." Major Rawlinson spoke with a tinge of irritation. "I don't know that they'll do anything yet. Not till I've seen them again. But I want him where *I* can find him at any minute now."

"You are sure he won't try to get away? He's at the railway station." Conrad had become alert, more eager, less distressed than Major Rawlinson.

Verity looked at him.

"Why should he, if he didn't do it?" she said.

"Quite right, Verity, and I'm bound to say he is not behaving like a guilty man. Anyway he can't know that the other fellow has told the police. We'd better get off to Scotland Yard, Conrad, and let them know."

"Why?" said Conrad. "There's no point in telling them what Verity has just told us till they've had time to consolidate the other evidence. They

know they can get their man. They may not need the story of the card."

"But *he* will—Francis will ask for it. It is his defence that he found it lying by the body. We are in a difficulty there and must get it set right without delay."

Conrad shook his head.

"A poor defence," he said.

"We'll have to go down to Scotland Yard in any case," said Major Rawlinson. "I promised to take you to help them over details in Weaver's statement this morning."

"All right," said Conrad. "I'll come now."

"I wonder," Major Rawlinson said as the two men prepared to leave, "if Verity'd mind waiting here in case Bond turns up with those things. The parcel is addressed to Conrad, and if he finds he's missed Francis at Victoria he may come up here with them himself."

"Of course she'll wait," said Conrad, and turning to the girl Major Rawlinson went on.

"If Bond does come, would you mind seeing him and telling him not to go back to-night? I'd like him to sleep at the flat. He can come in after his theatre or flickers—or whatever he's up in town to see."

"Yes," said Verity, "I'll wait."

"I'll come back and take you out to lunch," said Conrad, turning to look at her as he followed Major Rawlinson to the door.

"Thank you, Conrad," said Verity in a dull tone. She did not turn her head and meet his eyes, and he hesitated a moment, looking at her in a half-disappointed, half-anxious question.

"Verity?" he said.

She made no reply and he followed Major Rawlinson out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

Verity went over to the table and began to sort the sheets of typescript she had brought into the room and to place them with others in a portfolio. She took up a pencil and made a swift correction on one page. Then she raised the lid of the dispatch-case in which the torn manuscript still lay and put away the last fragments of it, those on which she had been at work that morning. As she did so, her face became set with the horror of remembrance and she let the lid fall, hiding the papers, and turned away with a shiver of repulsion.

Mrs. Emmer came in.

"Would you mind telling me, Miss Pearce, if Mr. Nuneham has decided to go to Sunningdale for the week-end?" she said, not without acidity.

"I don't think so — but he'll be back here before lunch-time."

"Let me remind you, Miss Pearce, that to-day being Saturday, lunch-time will be too late."

"Too late — no." Verity shook her head.

"If Mr. Nuneham is to have proper meals over the week-end I must go out before the shops close, which — in *this* part of London, Miss Pearce — occurs at one o'clock precisely, whatever it may do in Chelsea."

"Oh, I see — yes. Mr. Nuneham must have everything as usual, of course."

"And, it being Mary's afternoon off, she's gone already, on account of the fog and catching her omnibus to Peckham."

"Mary has gone?"

"And not likely to get back, if I may say so, knowing what her mother is. Not until the morning, Miss Pearce."

"Not till to-morrow," said Verity.

Mrs. Emmer betrayed some annoyance. She clearly had expected a more helpful response than these dazed reiterations of her own statements.

"My point being, Miss Pearce — to put it in words, that if you could make it convenient to stay, though normally, as I know, you have your

week-ends free from twelve o'clock—I'd go out now and be back as soon as circumstances and the fog permit. In case of messages or telephone calls or in case Mr. Nuneham comes in and wonders where I am."

"Yes, Mrs. Emmer, I'll wait till Mr. Nuneham comes back," said Verity. "I have a message for Major Rawlinson's butler, if he should come."

"No mention of any message was entrusted to me," said Mrs. Emmer, "so perhaps it's just as well I should be going out. I'll get on my hat, Miss Pearce."

Mrs. Emmer and her dignity made an exit, and Verity, crossing to the door of the typing-room, went in, leaving it open behind her.

In the silence of the empty stage there was a faint sound, as though some not very confident hand had touched a bell-push. After a pause the sound was repeated, and presently Mrs. Emmer, wearing the hat she had spoken of and buttoning herself into a bright silk waterproof coat, came back into the room.

"Major Rawlinson's man to see you, Miss Pearce," she announced. "I've left him in the hall."

"Ask him to come into the library," said Verity's

voice, speaking from the inner room.

The stage had grown darker. Outside the windows the fog had thickened to a heavy twilight and seemed to have penetrated the room and to spread a thin veil over the outlines of the furniture and to cloud the upper spaces. Against this dimness the light of the fire on the hearth beat fitfully, as though the coals Verity had placed there half an hour earlier were now flaming. The shadows of the fender and of the table beyond it were thrown backwards, slanting, angular, distorted. They cut the room into strange segments and reached up to the walls, obliterating the maps that hung there in dimly gleaming frames.

The two doors stood open, opposite to one another: the door that opened outwards into the room where Verity had gone: the door that opened inwards from the hall where Mrs. Emmer's voice could be heard repeating Verity's request to the man who waited there. Mrs. Emmer's exit from the flat was marked by the snick of the Yale latch as she closed the front door behind her.

But Verity still lingered over some arrangement of papers in the inner room and the man did not come in from the hall. The momentary emptiness of the stage gave the audience time to realise that

these two unseen people were alone in the flat together.

Verity appeared and, seeing no one there, she raised her voice, took a few steps forward, and called:

"Won't you come in, please?"

Half-way to the table, she stopped. The man who answered her summons stood in the doorway, hesitating, uncertain. It was Francis. In his hand he held a brown paper parcel.

"Oh," said Verity. "I thought Bond was coming here."

"No, miss," said the man. "As I was crossing the yard at Victoria I ran into Bond. His train *had* got in after all. But there's great confusion on account of the fog. So I took the parcel from him and brought it myself, as was the first arrangement."

"You've been very quick," said Verity.

The footman smiled.

"I took the train to South Ken and tubed it back to Green Park. I learnt to do that in a fog when I was working in Bond Street and living in Stockwell."

The man spoke easily, giving the information with the rather touching air of one who had been

forced into the habit of accounting for all his movements.

Verity looked at him. Knitting her brows as if making a rapid calculation, she said:

"Do you live there now?"

"No, miss. I live with Major Rawlinson."

"I mean, is your home in Stockwell? Could you go there now?"

"Not now," he said. "I have to be somewhere near Major Rawlinson, and my wife — she went back to her parents in Ireland when . . ." He broke off with a gesture of excuse for a wife who had not been able to keep a home for him. Verity did not pay any attention to this unspoken apology. It was possible that she had never been told the facts lying behind the queer footman's presence in the Rawlinsons' household.

"I don't know what to do," she said, still with the same air of concentrating on an immediate problem. "You can't stay here, Mrs. Emmer will be back in half an hour."

"Excuse me, miss." The man came forward and held out the parcel. "Major Rawlinson's first instructions were for me to place this parcel in Mr. Nuneham's own hands, if he were in, and to go back to Netherhall Mansions to pack for him. And over the telephone just now he said the same.

He said nothing about staying here."

She made a swift movement with her left hand, shaking it twice from the wrist with her arm stretched down and back, turning her head sideways towards her right shoulder. It was a gesture she had used once before in a moment of tension, but this time it expressed authority as well as strain, as though she were bidding not Francis only to listen to her, but were ordering other and more insistent voices to be silent. The whole of her pose, from the tips of the fingers of her backward-stretching hand to the averted head with closed eyelids and the bitter compression of the lips, was at once that of resistance to temptation and a summoning of energy for action to come.

"You can't go to Netherhall Mansions," she said, "and you can't stay here."

"No," said Francis, "why should I?"

Verity went swiftly up to the writing-table and took up her handbag which she had left there with the papers.

"Look," she said, coming down-stage, as she fumbled with trembling hands at the clasp. "You must go to my flat in Chelsea. Do you know Glebe Place?"

"Yes."

"Here are the latchkeys. Let yourself in. It's

on the second floor of No. 9. This is the key of the street door, and you go down a passage to the stairs. The long key is for the door of my flat."

She held out the two keys on their ring: but he made no movement to take them from her.

"Did Major Rawlinson say I was to go there?" he questioned.

"No! No! He thinks you have gone straight from Victoria to Netherhall Mansions."

"Then I must go there. I promised to see that this parcel was given to Mr. Nuneham himself or else to you, miss. Here it is."

Once more he held out the parcel to her.

"Put it down — anywhere," she said, "and take the keys. They may be at Netherhall Mansions by now."

"Who?" he asked, putting the parcel and his hat on a chair near the door.

"The police."

"The police?"

"Yes." She sucked in her dry lips to moisten them before she could speak again. "I don't remember your name," she began.

"I'm called Francis at present," he said.

"Well, then, Francis, listen. The police have caught a man who says you were helping him with the jewel robberies in September."

"The dirty dog! It's Weaver, I suppose."

"I don't know. He says you — you were going to give him some of the things out of the house."

"I didn't give him anything. Nothing was missing. Was it?"

"I don't think so."

"Well then?"

"That isn't all. He says he saw you kill Mrs. Nuneham."

"It's a lie! She was dead when I went into the room. They've all been shielding that Mr. Grainger. I saw him at the door of her room when I went across the passage before dinner. And I found one of his picture cards on the floor by the body. Major Rawlinson knows. He made me promise not to tell: but he'll have to produce the card now. They have a down on me because I'm out on licence, but the Major'll see me safe. He's got that card. I gave it to him myself."

"Major Rawlinson hasn't got that card now, Francis."

"Who has it?"

"Nobody. It has been destroyed."

"My God! He's fooled me . . ." The man was shaking with rage and fear.

"I destroyed it, Francis."

"You! You were in it—to shield that blasted Grainger."

She did not flinch or raise her voice; nor did the hand in which she still held the keys he would not take from her tremble as she spoke:

"It was not Mr. Grainger who killed her," she said.

Something assured and unshaken in her tone struck him and his rage and fear left him.

"How do you know?" he said.

"Because I did it."

"Christ!"

She held out the keys to him again.

"So, you see," she said, "why you must go away from here and not go to Netherhall Mansions. It will make things more difficult if they arrest you this morning."

"Look here," he said. "I didn't do it: but if Weaver has said I did there'll be a bit of bother—and it'll be worse if I try to get away. You are quite wrong about it being more difficult."

"I mean for me," she said.

"For you?" He had not thought of her: his own peril had been enough. "You've got it wrong. If they charge me it'll give you a chance. Have you got a passport? Can you get out of the country? There's the two o'clock boat-train. You could get

that. They'll be busy sorting out the evidence again. I'll let them have it about Grainger. That'll give you time."

"I don't need so much time as that," she said. "I am almost ready now."

"That's all very well," he protested, "but I've got to think of myself. You've got your plans all laid: but I must know more than I do now. You've told me that you destroyed the one bit of evidence I'd got. You must see that, if I'm willing to hold the police up a bit investigating the charge against me, while you clear out of the country, you must give me something to balance it. You're set on saving your own neck—but you must get mine out of the noose before you leave this room."

"I'm not going to leave the country," she said. "I am going to give myself up."

"What?"

"That is why I want you not to be arrested first. So that it will be over quickly."

He had dropped all pretence of being a servant now.

"You don't know what you are saying," he said. "You don't know what it means. 'I'm going to give myself up,' you say, 'it will be over quickly.' It will only *begin*. I know what it means. I've been there myself. You can't go to the police

and say, 'I plead guilty. Put me out of my pain.' They'll take you all right — and put you in a cell — and question you — day after day — week after week — it'll be weeks, months maybe, before you even come to trial. You've got friends. There'll be a defence — an appeal — you'll stand in the dock day after day — and night after night you'll lie awake in a cell. And when it's all over — they'll never hang you — you're a woman — you're only a girl——" He paused and looked at her. "Why are you doing this?" he said. "To shield Grainger?"

"No," said Verity. "He did not do it. I did."

He shook his head.

"Was it the husband all the time? Are you shielding him?"

"If I were," said Verity, "it would be simpler for me to do nothing, since there is a warrant out for your arrest."

"Then why don't you let them get on with it?"

"Because you are not guilty — not of that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I have told you. Now will you please take my latchkeys and go?"

He drew a step nearer to her but the keys fell

to the floor between them and lay there, shining in the firelight which had now increased into a pulsating glow, throwing their shadows back upon the room, so that they moved like giants against the scene behind them.

"I shall stay here, with you," he said, "until someone comes. I don't care if it is the police. Then you can tell them yourself—and see what they make of it."

"Francis!" She spoke his name as if it were a friend's. "This is the last thing I may ever ask anyone in my life. I want to be alone for a little time before I am taken. And, if they take you first, there will be people who will try to believe that you did it. I want you to go so that that may not happen. You *are* in some danger, Francis. I want you to be safe until they know you are not guilty."

"But I am nothing to you."

"All these weeks," she said, "I have waited and hoped that nobody would be accused. I hoped I might live and forget—after a time—if nobody else were accused. And, because they were trying to find someone—and because they did not quite give up the idea that it might be you—I have owed my life to you for nearly six weeks, Francis. You are that to me."

The man put his hand to his forehead for a moment.

"I believe you did do it," he said. "What made you?"

"It was so easy," she said. "I had always hated her. She was destroying our work."

"I've known women like that," he said. "They are not fit to live. My mother — she was an actress — one of the sort that plays in Ibsen and Shakespeare and at special performances — she'd been at Oxford and she spoke verse very well. When I was born, one of these women came along and — well, I never remember seeing my father. He died — drink it was — after he'd left my mother and me. The other woman had driven him crazy.

"I saw her once. She came to my mother's dressing-room after a matinee. I was seven years old, but I knew then what the name of the play, *The White Devil*, meant. She said things to my mother and my mother burst into tears. And she gave me some sugar-plums. I took them. I was only a kid. But it was a treachery to my mother to take those sugar-plums. I think that's when I began to be a wrong 'un. I took the sweets from the woman who had made my mother cry. I wish I had killed her. If I had, even if I had thrown her sweets in her face, it would have been a strength

in my memory, not a rottenness. I remembered that woman when I came into the bedroom the other night and heard Mrs. Nuneham talking to you. If I'd not been a rotter I'd have killed her myself and given those false pearls of hers to Weaver when he came to the window."

"Francis!"

"Yes. You may as well know it now. I was in league with Weaver. I couldn't help myself. He'd found out where I was. I didn't know him. Others did, men who'd known me and what I was doing time for. They told him where I was. I got a letter from him threatening to tell one of the housemaids that I was out on licence if I didn't hand him a packet of stuff on the balcony that night, between their going down to the dining-room and when dinner was served. I was going to do it. It was a dirty trick to play on the Major. He'd been good to me — and it was his honour to keep me straight. I was afraid of those servants. You don't know what it was like — being laughed at because I was clumsy at my work. . . . Oh, I'm a rotter, I wish I'd killed her for her jewels."

"But nothing was taken. You did not rob her. You did not give anything to Weaver."

"I didn't dare. Those pearls were false."

"But she always said . . ." Verity was startled.

"I'd been in the business. They weren't worth ten bob."

The man's disgust and Verity's astonishment reinforced one another, as they stood speechless for a moment, facing the past. In that silence the never quite forgotten theme of Marta reasserted itself, adding pretentiousness and falsity to her arrogance, establishing the discord of her life, carrying the development of this play about her death one step nearer to its final resolving chord.

"But Weaver has told the police that he saw you——"

"I warned him. I'd seen her. I told him to clear out."

"You thought of saving him—that wasn't rotten."

"I was afraid of Weaver—I hadn't time to think."

"Did you tell Major Rawlinson?"

"No. I was afraid of Weaver. I told you I was a rotter."

"Yes." Verity agreed dispassionately. She had no longer any impulse to veil the harshest truth with a polite denial. "So am I. But even rotters can do a decent thing sometimes. I want you to

help me. Can't you understand? I want you to be where no one will dream of looking for you till I've done what I've got to do."

"You've not got a pistol—or poison? You'd not jump out of that window?"

He raised his arm and the shadow behind him sent a gigantic hand pointing across the wall.

"No. That would be no good."

"You'd *rather* give yourself up."

"I must."

"Look here! It isn't that I'm trying to get out of going now; but you seem to have got it all planned out for me."

"It has been my work to plan things out for . . . for people."

"For this man Nuneham?"

She nodded.

"And if—if his wife had died—differently—you'd have asked nothing better than to go on planning for him always?"

"You have no business to ask me such a question."

The man looked at her with a kind of scorn.

"If I'm to be hanged for what you've done," he said, speaking with difficulty, "you might treat me as a human being for a moment."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you are making a mistake. You cannot do that for me."

"You think you are too proud to let someone else — even a ticket-of-leave man — suffer for your — your crime. Have you thought for a moment what it's going to mean — you dragging yourself — and your jealousy and your private affairs which are nothing to me — dragging all the nice, good, self-controlled people you're mixed up with into the courts — into the newspapers? It won't be just you suffering, it will be everyone you know. Just to clear your conscience. Can't you see that they've got a good case against me — against the rotter who'd be better dead? There'll be no newspaper story worth a headline in sending me to the gallows. I've been their man all along. Don't I know it! Why, the Major didn't dare to leave me behind in the country with the other servants in case they all gave notice rather than stop in the same house with me. And here in London he's hardly dared to let me out of his sight. I'm his valet now. I've been as good as under arrest for six weeks. It's more than likely they'll get me again on what is true in Weaver's tale. And even if they can't, you don't suppose the Major's going to keep me on when that gets about? And then where'll I be? I'm no good. I never have been. Can't you let me go

through with it? You said just now you owed six weeks of your life to me. You can owe me the rest and I'll never press for payment."

He made a step towards her in his eagerness but she backed away from him.

"Those are not the important things," she said. "I can't think of other people now. I've got to save my soul."

"Your soul! Your soul!" he raged at her. "If there is such a thing as a soul, what about mine? I tell you I'm no good. I was a traitor to my mother—for what?—for a box of sweets. And I knew it. Don't tell me a boy of seven is too young to know when he sells his soul. I knew it then as well as I knew I was betraying a good employer when I left the safe open so that unset jewels could be taken out of it in Grafton Street. The Major took notice of me because of good conduct in jail and because I seemed better educated than men whose crimes hadn't been half as mean as mine were. I let him down. A soul to be saved? Mine, if I've got one—not yours. You killed a wicked woman, as anyone might scotch a viper. You saved something from destruction. And you've made me face myself at last. I've never looked at myself till to-day. You've lit that little candle you call a soul in me again—it has shown me that there is

something I too can save. You cannot not let me save my soul."

They were still now, opposing one another, standing rigid in their separate intensities: only their shadows moved, pulsing in the firelight with a rise and fall like the systole and diastole at the heart of destiny.

When Verity spoke her voice was level and toneless as though it came from a judge passing a sentence long since decided on.

"You are nothing to me now," she said, "but if I let you do that there would be your life and Marta's life *in* me — *with* me — so that neither you nor I would be at rest, just as she is not at rest. I did not know at first that a life broken off as hers was, does not cease till it has broken the breaker. I cannot bear the weight of her life — which I broke — and of your life which you offer to break for me. You cannot buy your own soul at the price of mine."

He listened to her with closed eyes, his face working painfully. When she had finished speaking, he said slowly, pausing between each difficult word:

"I could write a confession—and blow my brains out."

He was afraid of what he had offered to do.

"That would not help me," she said.

"Couldn't you . . .?" he asked.

Their voices had sunk to so low a note that the pitch of their speaking had become identical. There was no longer a man's voice and a woman's voice alternately in dialogue, but one voice speaking to itself in the same key—on the same level.

"If I took that way," she said, "how could I be certain that you had escaped? *I* know what happened and how. You could not answer their questions. Only I can do that."

"A woman poisons or drowns herself," he said, and then, calling a memory from the past:

"I know death hath ten thousand several doors  
For men to take their exits; and 'tis found  
They go on such strange geometrical hinges  
You may open them both ways. . . ."

"What are you saying, Francis?"

"I used to hear my mother say her lines when she studied a part. It is the only thing I ever did for her."

"You must do something for me now."

"I have said I will."

She made a gesture, shaking herself out of the dream into which they had both wandered.

"There is something that must be done quickly. Now!" Her voice had regained its everyday level. "In the bedroom of my flat, on a table under the window, there is a book with a lock on it. It is a diary I have written. When they go there — afterwards — someone — anyone — may read it. I want you to go — now — quickly — and take that book down to the river and throw it from the bridge into mid-stream. Now, before you go back to Major Rawlinson."

"Your own diary," he said, nodding his head, understanding.

She went back to the hearth-rug and picked up the keys.

"Quickly," she said, holding them out to him.

He took them from her and put them carefully in the inner pocket of his coat. The order she had given and his obedience to it had restored him to his automatism.

"Very good, miss," he said, and turned to go to the door: not until he had reached it did she call after him:

"Goodbye, Francis — and — thank you."

He turned with downcast eyes and faced her

from the doorway. Taking his hat from the chair where he had laid it as he came in, he twisted its brim in his fingers. Standing so, his face showed pale and harsh with irregular features, a wide brow and a narrow chin; the face of a man who might have been a poet and was only an ineffectual servant. Then he raised his eyelids suddenly and his eyes opened to their widest; clear and blue and shining with a light they had not shown till now. It was an amazing look that fixed itself on Mary Archer's face: a look that drained all the force and anguish, all the power that had been hers in the scene through which they had just gone and gave them back to her as a strength she had possessed and had now shared with him so that it was increased in both of them. She returned his look, and the same shining was in her face also.

In the silence that followed his exit a woman in the audience was heard sobbing. The sound snapped the tension and the whole house broke into half-hysterical applause. David closed his eyes and leant back in his stall, glad of a respite from the strain of watching this mortal and shadowed conflict.

As he did so he became aware for the first time that he had been bending forward, his hands on

his knees, the muscles of his neck and shoulders taut and constricted with excitement. Was it a great scene, or great acting, or both, which had made him forget everything but the issue that had been fought out on the stage and now left him trembling and almost sick with apprehension of what was to come? Had the tired and cynical Renishaw planned and evoked the sense of giant forces behind these players, driving them; controlling their movements through some pitiless game in which this man and this woman were no more than pieces moved here and there over a few squares of a board they could not see? Or was it the interplay of two actors of more than common range who, releasing their own powers in their proper medium, had to-night found them augmented by those incalculable visitations of the spirit that controls and is controlled by genius? A fragment from one of the *Drennan Letters* which he had been reading that afternoon came to his mind: "To-night in Belfast she is supposed to have reached the heights of human powers." He could not quote this in the notice he was presently to write about this young actress: he was not sure how much of the effect she had produced might not be due to the greater experience and accomplishment of the actor whose personality filled the

stage each time he entered, and left it perceptibly less enthralling the moment he withdrew. It went with him now but the audience kept the sense of it vibrant still. This habit of applause on certain exits which he had once found superfluous really helped instead of destroying the illusion. It filled a pause: it gave the players left on the stage a breathing space in which to gather their forces for the next attack.

The girl had gone up-stage and stood behind the writing-table. She was staring at the telephone. Twice she touched the instrument and drew back her hand as if the bar were of searing iron. Then, setting her teeth, she raised the receiver to her ear and with quick fingers dialled a number. The answer was immediate.

"Mr. Conrad Nuneham's secretary speaking. Can you give me the Detective-Inspector in charge of the Nuneham murder case? Yes. It's urgent. No, I cannot give a message. Thank you . . . Miss Pearce. Mr. Nuneham's secretary. Yes. No, I do not want Mr. Nuneham. Yes. I have obtained a — the confession. Yes. Yes. Here — waiting. Now. No. I can manage it perfectly well. You will come yourself? Has Mr. Nuneham left? When will he be here? Yes. Can you give us ten minutes?

Quarter of an hour. Yes. No, you need not bring any extra men — there will be no trouble. Quite quietly."

She put down the receiver and stood, with chattering teeth, shaken by tremors that seemed to run downwards from her head through her whole body.

The little critic put his programme in his pocket and looked at his wrist-watch.

"Crumbs!" he whispered, "it's nearly eleven. Sorry, old boy, I'll have to get out."

David slewed himself sideways, stretching his legs out into the gangway to let the little man pass, and saw that Dacres also was struggling to his feet. There were indignant whispers of "Sit down!" from the stalls behind him. In his present mood nothing would have made David stand up to share the old man's unpopularity. There was, he knew, no pressure put on the critic of the *Clarion* to get his copy in early: that popular newspaper sent out its country editions without any notice of new plays. Dacres should have stayed for the final curtain, which in any case could not now be very long delayed. The old man adjusted his muffler and fished under his seat for his coat. It was stupid and cruel of him to make so long an exit while

the girl was holding the stage alone. He should have accepted David's offer of the gangway seat if he wanted to leave before the play was over. The remonstrances of the rest of the audience did nothing to hasten him. He dropped his stick with a clatter. David bent down, retrieved the stick and kept it until Dacres, clutching the backs of the stalls in front of him, reached the gangway and held out his hand for it.

"Morbid rubbish!" he growled as he took the stick and hobbled away.

The whole incident had not occupied forty seconds, and when David could turn his attention to the stage again, he saw that Mary Archer was still standing behind the table, and that the light from the fire no longer leapt and blazed but had died down to a steady glow which lit the space beyond the hearth but left the back of the stage in shadow.

The girl left the writing-table and, crossing to the door into the typing-room, she closed it. Then, going up to the window, which now showed as a series of white squares on murky yellow glass, she drew the curtains together and shut out the fog-ruined day. The background of the scene was now changed both in colour and in line. The criss-

cross of the casements, the fantastic silhouette of the Egyptian bronzes, showing against the sky, gave place to horizontal folds of velvet, fluted and steady, their colour repeating itself in the spreading petals of the roses in the vase where Mrs. Emmer had left them.

The whole room was changed in its aspect: the austerity had gone. Firelit, curtained, flowery, it offered, to the eye, the rose and gold and crimson of leather arm-chairs and Persian rugs, obliterating the starkness of the scene that had taken its character from the angularity of window-frame and the violent shadows thrown against it while Verity and Francis had faced one another a few minutes earlier.

David watched her as she moved about the room: saw the pale slimness of her hands against the dark curtain: saw the curve of her head over the curls that were tied back on her neck above the collar of her dress. For the first time since the scene had opened, he was aware of the colour and texture of her dress, soft and plain and dusky, not red, not blue, not violet, a colour in which the blue of her eyes and the scarlet of her lips seemed to have met and sunk beneath a darker surface. He noticed that her feet and ankles matched the long slenderness of her hands and that her low-cut

slippers were of some bronze-gleaming material, satin or fine leather, and wondered, so complete was the illusion of reality, whether she had changed them in the inner room after she came in from the street.

There was time, as she moved about the stage, to see how lovely a creature this was whom her violent nature and the laws man had set about his own dangerousness were combining to destroy.

She moved down-stage, and as the firelight played over the grape-bloom surface of her dress, David remembered the same colour in an ugly contrast with red in the furnishing of the bedroom where the play had started. Now, in another distribution of masses, it was producing harmony in the place of discord. He knew that this visual reference to the opening stages of the drama had been made with intent, was one more detail in the production planned to bring it to its summing-up — its coda, in a final scene.

The stage grew darker. There was a sound of cinders falling together in the grate, a leap of flame and then a dimmer glow. In the silence the tapping of Verity's heels on the polished boards marked time as she crossed to the chair by the door where Francis had left Major Rawlinson's parcel. She took it to the table, moved a few papers and a

letter basket to make room for it and placed it where Conrad would see it when he came in. All her gestures were charged with the significance of actions consciously performed for the last time. She examined each pen and pencil on the writing-table; removed a sheet of ink-stained blotting paper from the pad there; tore it up and threw the pieces carefully into the waste-paper basket; straightened the bottles of red and of black ink in their stand; laid a paper-knife within easy reach of the coming occupant of the swing-chair on the further side of the table; ran her finger along the half-dozen reference books in the mahogany trough beside the telephone, and made each action a separate phrase in the lingering rehearsal of a farewell she was about to take. Twice, as she moved behind the table, she drew a quivering breath, half sob, half sigh, and each time the dolorous sound found its echo in an audible crying from some different part of the audience.

While she was still tending the arrangement of the book trough, Conrad's key was heard in the latch of the hall door and he came in quickly, still wearing his hat and overcoat.

"Hallo, Verity. In the dark?" he said. There was a new vitality in his voice and he moved as one who has been released from a burden. Crossing to

the table, he turned on the lamp that stood beside Madge Rawlinson's sheaf of roses.

The light glowed orange through the parchment shade and fell in a wide circle over the water-filled glass trumpet that held the flowers, shining on their glossy leaves and lighting some of their crimson blooms into a vividness of colour, so that the lamp and the shining vase and the breathing flowers became the centre and focus of light and warmth and fragrance in the still room, where Verity waited, almost hidden now in the shadow the brightness of Conrad's coming had cast beyond the limit of the light in which he stood.

"What have you been doing?" he asked, still in that same hurried, confident tone. "Putting things straight for me for the week-end?" He answered his own question.

She came round the table and stood before him, looking down at her own hands, which she held clasped to steady herself.

He took off his hat, but did not put it down, holding it in his gloved hands, ready to put on again in a moment.

"I'm sorry, Verity," he said, "but I can't take you out to luncheon after all. They've been pretty quick over this business and George wants me to go on to lunch with him. He's gone back to

Netherhall Mansions for the papers about the man's licence. I said I'd join him there as soon as I'd let you know. I didn't want to telephone the news. There seems no doubt about it. All the facts fit. I'm sorry for George. He trusted the fellow. But, oh, Verity! the relief! I wanted to tell you myself. So that you could go home—well, not exactly happy, perhaps—but I wanted you to know. I'm sorry about lunch—but will you dine with me to-night?"

"I shan't be able to," she said.

"Can't you put whoever it is off?"

"No," said Verity.

He put down his hat. The gesture was automatic. It pointed the actor's response to all that the man heard without understanding in the tone of her monosyllable.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Conrad," said Verity. "You are happy now?"

"Almost," he admitted.

She took a step nearer to him, clasped her hands behind her back and raised her face to his.

"Then," she said, a great breath driving her words from her, "kiss me—now."

He stared at her, incredulous, astonished.

"Now?" he echoed.

"Soon," she breathed.

His hands gleamed pale in the circle of lamp-light, as the loose gloves dropped from them to the floor and he stretched out his arms to take her. But, even as he held her, he did not believe or understand.

"I have waited so long. I did not know. I did not think it would be like this," he said.

"Like this!" she echoed.

"I hoped—but it seemed impossible. There were so many barriers."

"It is impossible—but the barriers are gone," she sighed. Her arms lay along his arms that held her; her hands were white on the sleeves of his coat. She did not look up at him, but her mouth, still un-kissed, was raised to his own.

"Verity," he said, "we are dreaming."

"Only for a moment, Conrad."

He frowned, and, raising one hand to his shoulder, took hers in it. "Come and sit by the fire. Your hand is cold. We must be sure. I can only stay a few minutes longer."

They came down-stage together, walking as if to music, her head against his arm as he led her to the chair where his dressing-gown still lay. When they reached it, he sat down, and she, still with his arm around her, sat by him on the wide arm of the chair, so that his face was below hers where

the firelight played upon them both with a steady radiance.

"Child," he said, "this is like the end before the beginning. You have crossed the bridge I thought I should have to build to you."

"It is the end before the beginning," she said.

"It is wonderful of you, that you are sure."

"Will you say it, Conrad?"

"Say what, my sweet?"

"The thing I am sure of."

"That I love you."

"Now?"

"Always."

"Always does not matter so long as it is now."

"It could not be now if it were not always."

"It can only be now."

He had not the clue to her meaning.

"It can only be this way for a moment, now, here, Verity. We shall have to wait and face things separately for a week or two. But — afterwards — when I am quite free — as free as you are now — oh! Verity."

She bent her head to give and take the kiss she had asked for. He raised his arm and drew her down to him and held her, and the firelight died down to a low gleam, so that their faces

were hidden in shadow and the passion of their silence seemed to be gathered into the globe of yellow lamplight and crimson flowers and shining crystal on the table in the centre of the room.

There was a sound of footsteps and the faint clash of crockery somewhere in the flat.

Verity raised her head and slipped to her feet from the arm of the chair.

"Mrs. Emmer has come in," she said.

Conrad stood up.

"I must go now. But" — his voice had a laugh in it — "for my own peace of mind I *must* say, 'Will you marry me, Verity?' "

She drew back from him, her hands clasped behind her, as they had been when she had first astonished him by her advance: but this time she raised her eyes to his.

"Thank you, Conrad," she said.

He did not notice that she had not said "Yes."

"I shall probably go down to Sunningdale with George to-morrow. We'll not be able to do much work early next week, I'm afraid, with this other business hanging over us."

"No," said Verity. "But it is all finished. You won't need me to work for you here next week."

He went to the table to take his hat, and saw

the papers she had arranged there.

"No," he said. "I shan't need you next week, Verity."

He drew on his gloves thoughtfully, and fastened each of them before he spoke again.

"It's rather marvellous," he said, smiling the slow, half-melancholy smile for which Lewis Keane's audiences waited as their parents had waited for Forbes-Robertson's a generation earlier, "to think that we have finished with this chapter." He made a gesture as if clearing the past away with the completed manuscript lying in its case. "Finished it—made it whole again—to-day, so that we can go on free to the end of the book."

She did not answer him.

"Please," she said. "Go now. Quickly."

He made a step towards her, but she turned away from him.

"No," she said, "not again. We have said goodbye."

"You are right," he said, and left her without another word, going straight out of the room without turning round to look at her and closing the door behind him.

She stood where he had left her, listening as though she could hear the very whisper of each breath he drew, until the sound of the hall door

closing behind him seemed to cut him off from her pursuing thought.

Then she turned and looked towards the chair by the fireplace where they had both clung together for a moment.

The folds of Conrad's dressing-gown gleamed silver-grey in the half-light from the grate, as they had glimmered in the light from the room where Marta's body had lain on the night of her murder. The scene was changed and the girl who now saw the robe had not seen Conrad as he stood in the first numbness of the shock at the end of the Second Act. But to the audience now waiting breathless for the final moment of the play, the look Verity now fixed on those shining folds was at once her look, the gaze of the desperate, hopeless lover at the last reminder of her love's physical presence, and their own remembering look backwards to the first surprise of the consequences of the crime she had committed. The pale shining of the robe which had clothed him in the moment of his shocked return to the days of his first love now lay where his head had lain as he yielded to the impact of a passion which had broken the bounds he had wished in decency to set about it, as, once before, it had blazed through the girl who

was its slave until she had to give him a freedom the price of which, unknown to him as yet, was now increased by the admission of their love.

The theme of Verity Pearce's expiation was now stated up to its final dismissing chord. Its accompanying subject, the rekindling of manhood in the deadened soul of Francis, had met it; run counter to it; been increased by contact with it, and had left it to rejoin the undeveloped motive from which it flowed. Conrad, the link between each section of the pattern, the medium through which the whole composition moved, had returned to the work from which he had come, the work that was, for him, a more compelling mistress than any woman he might love and forget or find a jealous rival to it. Conrad and Francis were gone. Verity was left—facing the lingering phantom of Conrad, the shuddering ghost of Marta, as they formed themselves out of the gleam on the silken robe hanging over the chair towards which she moved.

The dignity of resolution had left her. She was now the creature who, in the face of death, had snatched a moment's doubly illicit joy, offering herself unasked, hiding her crime to trade on the weakness of the man whom it had set free. He had given her the moment for which she had asked, given it almost lightly. Her insistence had dimin-

ished her. He had taken the thing for which his own impulse had bidden him wait; had sacrificed a decency he had hoped to save. With the flush of her cheek still warm on his own, he had left her, promising to return, not to her, but to the work in which her aid was no longer essential. She was now the completely tragic figure whose potential goodness has been ruined by the flaw in its own nature.

The room was still lit by the golden centre where the lamp Conrad had turned on shed its unwavering ray over the roses in their shining glass: but she moved outside the circle of that light, shivering and alone.

The fierce foreshortening of the stage had crammed her life into a two hours' traffic, showing her as a subject to which Conrad was the answer and to which Francis, coming from outside, had brought a voice from outside in commentary and development. Francis, who was lost, had offered her material salvation, and she, rejecting it, had climbed to a momentary safety, from which she had slipped back again as, once more, the inevitable statement of her theme had in the hushed *adagio* of their muted passion brought Conrad's answer back again — and more clearly than before, into the final recapitulating climax. And, as in a

fugue, though the end is known, the device by which the composer will round off the whole is waited for in a speculative excitement, to be carried higher with a climbing *cadenza* or stirred to awe by the tragic masses of a final harmony, so the last suspense was now held by every wounded step the creature on the stage made into the shadow by the sinking fire.

When she reached the chair, she stooped over the grey silk that lay there, and, with her hands supporting her as though she bent over the rim of a well, she stooped and hid her face in its folds. Once, twice and again, she dipped as if drinking from a terrible fountain, and at the third draught her tears came and she fell forward, with lax arms hanging down, abandoned to grief.

The beat of her sobbing kept time with the heart-beats of those who heard it: they caught a sharp breath out of time, breaking the rhythm, when a door-bell, pressed by a heavy thumb outside, sent its shrill summons through the room.

The girl lifted her ravaged face from her arms and stood erect. As she did so, the grey silk slipped from its place, falling away from her, folding itself together on the seat of the chair she would never see again.

The door opened and Mrs. Emmer, in a troubled voice, announced:

"The police: to see you, miss."

Verity walked a few steps towards the door.

"Let them come in," she said.

There was a flicker of bright buttons on dark uniforms; a grouping of faces in the doorway. Verity Pearce, her hands clasped, as if pinioned, behind her back, waited with closed eyes and lifted chin, while the curtain fell.

The fringe of the yellow brocade curtain had touched the floor of the stage and its strands had spread apart, as they do when the curtain has been adjusted to fall an inch too low for its own length, before the applause began.

It did not break in a storm, but arose sporadically from different places in the theatre. One by one, the spectators came back from the dream in which the last episode of the play had held them. After a second or two the tension was completely broken: the clapping was augmented by shouts that grew in volume until the whole house joined in the uproar. When the curtain rose again, disclosing the entire cast grouped together on a fully illuminated stage, many people in the audience

stood up in their seats, crying and shouting, half in relief from their own emotions, half in the specifically hero-worshipping excitement which makes an orgy of the first night of any play that is not a manifest and hopeless failure.

At the first curtain Vera Paley, dressed in an evening gown she had not worn in her part, stood in the centre of the line of players between Lewis Keane and Nicholas Madison. The second time it rose her place was taken by Mary Archer.

"That's not a stage dress," the woman behind David explained to her friend, in a lull in the applause. "After to-night Vera'll take her call at the end of the First Act in her dressing-gown. She's going on to supper at the Savoy with the Darbishires to-night."

The smaller part characters began to take their calls: Winifred Marsden, the housemaid, with John Wyllie, who had played Inspector Dobson: Geraldine Hunt and Billy Vyse in their characters of Lisa Thelusson and Cyril Grainger: the actor and actress who had taken the parts of Archdeacon and Mrs. Bartlett: James Dawlish and Norah Bowdler as Major and Mrs. Rawlinson. These all received a welcome that was more than polite; but there was no shouting until Nellie Ragg, still wearing Mrs. Emmer's hat and silk waterproof,

was discovered taking the first of the single calls. She was hailed with a roar that testified to a popularity won in many other, possibly more effective, parts. When the curtains had fallen after Miss Ragg's reception, there was a pause while the audience clapped on, getting its breath for the shouting of "Keane!" "Madison!" "Mary Archer!" which marked the approaching climax of its own active and much enjoyed contribution to the evening's performance.

Keane and Madison took a call together: then Keane led on Miss Archer, but it was not until Madison and Miss Archer had answered repeated cries for them, that the house rose to the full expression of its approval and sustained it through their ovation to Keane taking a single call, and to Madison, who followed him, and finally to Mary Archer, who, still a little dazed, as though she alone of all the players could not quite shake off the part, stood in the centre of the stage, half smiling as she steadied herself with one hand on the table behind her and bowed a little stiffly in answer to plaudits.

It was as the curtain rose and fell three times before the welcome to this new young actress had spent itself, that David, for the first time in his

theatre-going life, understood the reason why this sound and fury after a serious play had remained in practice throughout the history of the theatre. He had, on more than one occasion, joined with protesting theorists who had exclaimed against the barbarity of thus tearing away the illusion from a serious and moving drama by an insistence on the personality of the individual actors apart from their existence in the characters they had just portrayed. He had been in more than one experimental theatre where the play had ended in religious silence and the actors had never appeared after the final curtain. Always, on these occasions, he had gone home with a sense that some point which the scene he had witnessed should have reached had, inexplicably, been missed. Until now he had supposed that the players or the production had not quite risen to the height of the argument. Now, as he saw Mary Archer failing at last in her artistry because she was too inexperienced an artist to be able to appear to drop the character she had created so soon as the play was ended, he knew what it was he had missed after the performance of much greater plays than this one.

A play in the theatre was not over when the curtain fell on it for the last time. Just as it began with the gradual assembling of the spectators; the

quickly communicated expectation of the growing entity of an audience that was to become one consciousness before long; the speculation aroused by a reading of the play-bill; the excitement that mounted with the lowering of the house-lights; the thrill as of a launching, when the first stage picture was disclosed in its proscenium; so it ended only when each of the men and women who had been more real than themselves when they took on the heightened reality of their art, returned in some degree to their original status and became once more merely, if triumphantly, players.

The intimacy established between the people of the drama, whose business it was to show themselves more completely in the exaggerated perspective of the stage than they could ever do under the decent constraint of life, and the spectators, who in these responses recognised the dark negative of their own lives, had to be broken, if the full effect of the play were to establish itself *after* the audience had expressed its own receptiveness. The reader of any work of fiction, whether it were story or drama, could keep his own recognition of himself in the course of the tale a secret. But when one human being has been stirred to laughter or to tears by the direct impact of the voice and movement of another, he has, for the

moment, yielded his own secret and must recover his inviolability, if he is not to defend himself by a denial that he has been so exposed.

"It's only a play," he must say to himself, before he can accept the validity of his own experience in witnessing it.

Sensitive children who cannot make this transition for themselves are often more distressed than delighted by plays especially written for their entertainment, and find only bewilderment in the assurance that the thing in which they feel themselves to be living is only make-believe. Any playgoer who has lost himself for an hour in the scene before him feels the same need to retreat within the boundaries of his normal life. It is by seeing and acclaiming the players as players, out of their characters, that this reassurance is obtained and the inexpressive man's terror of expressed imaginings is laid to rest.

And for the players themselves there is the complementary need to be set free from the thing they have created, the character which, as they learnt to possess it, has turned and possessed them, so that, unless the break between it and themselves can be made, they cannot shake off the person they have created and so lose their power over it.

David remembered the case of a young actor he had known, who had given so remarkable a performance in a small but effective part in the first and second acts of a successful play that he had aroused the jealousy of the leading man and, after the first night, had not been allowed to appear on the stage when the calls were taken at the end of the play. The boy had not been able to dissociate himself from his part. His audience had accepted his identification but had not dismissed him from it by their recognition of his identity when it was over. He had begun to act badly; to forget his lines; to make a failure of his great success. Once the actor has established his part by contact with an audience he must leave it in the theatre, which is its world, and, restored to his own personality by the acclamation of his individual work on the stage, must be able to live as himself during the hours which intervene between his performances.

Nicholas Madison — Lewis Keane — Mary Archer, who had been thief and avenger and murderess, would now go out and sup and dance and meet friends, and sleep, or make love, or do business of their own for twenty-four hours, and would come back to the stage again as Francis and Conrad and Verity Pearce, showing the secret

heart of everyman to everyman, to-morrow, as they had done to-night. But though the skill with which they played was theirs, a gift of nature enhanced by training, the power released by them came to them from the audience and went back to it again, setting them free. The myriad beatings of hand on hand that still filled the air, snapped link after link of the chains that had bound each player to his part and had held the character he played suspended in a reality that existed for so long as he imposed it from the stage. David understood now for the first time the reason for the often quoted disparity between the greatness of a performance on the stage or on the concert platform and the often disconcerting shallowness of the performer when dissociated from his character or his instrument: understood why a play that seemed of small account when read sometimes took on the proportion of greatness in the theatre.

"Author! Author!" shouted the audience.

Lewis Keane, standing in front of the once more assembled company, was explaining that Mr. Renishaw was not in the house but that he would be told of the wonderful reception given to the play in which they had all been so proud to act.

Then a voice cried, "Beany! Producer!" The

cry was taken up and, after a pause, Nicholas Madison left the stage and returned with a short, stout, bald-headed man, wearing a white tie and waistcoat, who came down to the footlights, let his monocle drop and swing on its ribbon, and was seen, though not heard, to utter what may have been a few words of acknowledgment.

"Vera said Beany'd lost his voice at the Dress Rehearsal, shouting at the electricians and keeping his temper with Mary Archer," said the well-informed woman, putting on her cloak as the orchestra broke into "God Save the King" and the warm glow of the footlights against the curtain gave place to the colder diffusion of the house lights.

David was still standing in his place, a little bemused by the crowding speculations that beset him, when a fussy, middle-aged first-nighter, impatient to be gone, pushed past him and knocked his programme from his hand. The woman who was with this man indicated her opinion of David's stupidity in not leaving the way free and he stepped out into the crowd and worked his way down to the orchestra rail, waiting till he could retrieve the programme on which he had made a few pencil markings to remind him of points for the criticism

he should have begun to write by now.

Most of the people who were pressing towards the exit talked; very few of them seemed to be speaking of the play. Those who were silent seemed to be tired. One man indeed, as he passed within earshot of David, was protesting against some inaccuracy in the detail of the police proceedings.

"They'd have insisted on taking the girl's evidence."

"I thought," said his companion, "it was a bit steep that no one saw her slip out of the room."

"Oh, I don't know . . ." began the other. The rest of the phrase was lost as the couple vanished into the passage.

Betterton, the critic, had made his way along the now empty front row of stalls and paused for a friendly word with David.

"What a foul play!" he said pleasantly. "I'm going to give Renishaw a good roasting on Sunday. Doverdale, here, is furious with me."

He turned to Marcus Doverdale, a confirmed first-nighter, who was known to declare he would rather see a bad play than none any evening of his life.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," said Doverdale. "You may be wrong."

"One must say what one thinks." Betterton was a little pompous.

"Yes, dear Betters, but one should be able to think."

"And to feel," said David.

"That too," agreed Doverdale, adding, as he followed his blond companion: "How *lovely* Mary Archer is!"

## ON THE STAIRS

DAVID retrieved his programme and went out from the stalls. He was almost the last person to leave the auditorium. Attendants had begun to draw white holland shrouds over the velvet seats and the house lights were already out. The crowd was thinning on the staircase: but on the half landing, where the bar of the cloak-room faced the curve of the building, there was still a block of men waiting for their coats.

A rush of cool air swept down from the lobby. Someone announced that it was pouring with rain and that there was a jam of cars and taxis outside.

As he waited his turn at the cloak-counter, phrases from the article he was about to write began to formulate themselves in David's mind:

"The greatness of a play can to some extent be measured by the extent of opportunity it provides for the actor. . . ."

"So fine a producer as Mr. Beany can make of careful lighting and a nicely balanced distribution of significant movement an illuminating commentary on the author's purpose. . . ."

"The title of this play, *The Ace of Wands*, seems to emphasise at once the subject of the play and its emotional content, and also to point the mechanical device by which the most important of several false clues is made to provide the substance of the great scene in the Third Act. . . ."

The great scene — but there was more than one. How flat and stale these journalistic phrases were in comparison with the state of mind in which the play had actually left him! Could he hope to set down on paper what he really felt about it? Was not the very idea of doing so shocking to him, as if he had contemplated some indecency of self-revelation? Was every dramatic critic faced with this shamefaced acknowledgment that it was impossible to write one-half of the truth about his own reactions to a play? How was Dacres, who had left twenty minutes before the play was over, going to justify his expressed condemnation of it? Would young Humphreys feel the same constraint as he, David, was conscious of, when he began to write of Mary Archer? What a beastly business it was, setting out to describe the personal accomplishment of men and women who depended for a livelihood on a play's success in a few hurried lines that could never be entirely sincere, and to pass a hasty, ill-formulated judg-

ment, that, whether lenient or severe, could not in the nature of things be even approximately just!

"Your coat, sir," said the attendant.

As he stood in the round marble portico of the Empress Theatre, waiting for the commissioner to bring him a taxi, O'Hara, his coat turned up to his ears, his hat on the back of his head, bustled out to a car in which a friend was waiting for him.

Seeing David, he stopped for an instant.

"Hallo," he said. "All in a day-dream?"

David spoke his conviction.

"It was superb," he said.

O'Hara narrowed his eyes.

"I give it three weeks," he pronounced, and scuttled off into the rain.

THE END



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